THE

Western NOVEL CLASSIC

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A FULL LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

BLACK RIVER RANCH

LYNN WESTLAND

ABOUT THIS WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC

BLACK RIVER RANCH

By LYNN WESTLAND

During the Civil War years, Monty Malcolm had been away from his home in the Black River country, serving as a Union spy. Now, his wounds healed, he asked nothing more than to find peace on his own ranch, and to forget the conflict which had scarred body and soul.

Malcolm's wish was not to be granted. He had not yet reached the home ranch when a bullet singed his hair; his neighbors, thinking he had betrayed the Union cause, reviled and robbed him, worst of all, he found sign of his wartime foe, the Beaver, and knew that their ancient enmity would flare afresh in new surroundings.

Yet in spite of all this, Malcolm did not suspect the total strength of the forces arrayed against him nor how big were the stakes in the game.

Lynn Westland in this WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC has written an exciting, fast-moving story of the old West.

BLACK RIVER RANCH

by Lynn Westland

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Chapter I

THE OLD, nagging pain was in his shoulder again, a recurrent ache which could not blot away the sharper pain inside him. He felt raw there, and sort of hollow, and maybe, Malcolm reflected sourly, that was what he was. Just a shell of a man, even if he did look the picture of health, a veteran returned from the wars with luck for a saddle-mate.

Luck! Malcolm's wide mouth twisted wryly as he shifted his weight to ease his position. Looks and luck could be fickle jades, both of them. Certainly that old wound had never healed properly, and he still felt the effects of the latest operation he had undergone. The doctor had warned him that he shouldn't ride for another couple of weeks at least.

But after he'd been so long away, impatience for the hills of home had been strong in him; and in any case, life was not so pleasant a thing as to be cherished unduly. So he was coming home at last, a year later than most veterans had returned. Coming back, though no one knew, no one cared, there was no one to welcome him. Malcolm's mouth twisted again, and his dark eyes were a little weary beneath their sardonic glitter. At least, there would be no one to curse him, either.

It came then, an old, familiar sound—doubly shocking in the afternoon stillness. The booming crash of the big rifle was perhaps half a mile away, and it came from somewhere up the long easy slope of the hill above, where the poplars and cottonwoods stood out in bright gold from among the evergreens, and the low-growing brush was like a torch lit against the coming cold of winter.

The shot was so like a voice from the dead past, so utterly unexpected, that for a moment Malcolm would not believe that the bullet had been meant for him, even though the lead twitched his old felt hat like an impatient hand.

It was hard to believe, because he had returned to that Black River Country seeking only one thing—to forget and to be forgotten. To find, if he might, on his own ranch, that elusive thing called peace. It

had not occurred to him that anyone would even guess that he was coming home, much less that anyone would care.

He had been down to the depths already—so far down, in the bitterness of frustration and loss and despair, that he had known that it would have been better had he died, sometime in the years which had marked the remorseless struggle between North and South; that it would have been better, simpler and kindlier to act no more on this stage where man seemed to be but a puppet jerked by invisible but savage strings. More than once he had hoped to die, and in that to find rest or, if not rest, at least oblivion.

Yet death had passed him by. And now that it threatened him at home, the old instinct to live, to fight back when threatened, was strong in him. So now he crouched low in the saddle, even as his spurs touched his cayuse, sending it plunging ahead to where trees and brush closed in to make a covert on either side of the little used cattle trail.

There had been no second shot, and the strident echoes, loud and startled by their own brashness, had now faded away to a shocked silence. Sheltered by the brush, Malcom pulled up, peering through the rustling russet leaves, questing the rising slopes above, a slow anger beginning to burn in him.

Up there, nothing moved. He saw, with a glance which encompassed the long hillside, where the wooded fringe ended, and above there was no adequate cover for a man to hide in—yet the shot had clearly come from above. Nor was there sufficient shelter for a gunman to climb back up to the bald crest of the mountain, no way to circle or descend without giving warning of his coming.

Still, some of those rocks or clumps of trees or brush might afford a hiding place, so long as a man made no move. That must be it.

But if a man intent on murder could not move without exposing himself, neither could a man climb to get at him without running the same risk of discovery and another bushwhack bullet. Still—

Removing his hat, Malcolm studied the twin holes thoughtfully. It had been excellent shooting, at that range—two inches lower down, and he would have been forever at rest. A thin, bitter amusement stirred in him at the thought, and it was reflected in the glance he lanced uphill again—showed, too, in the high, sloping shoulders, the thin, tired face, even in the pointed black mustache which seemed to curl upward of its own accord.

His mind was figuring out the situation. He eyed the trail ahead, where it dipped down to the valley floor, noting how thickly the trees and brush grew there. A quick twist of wrist and fingers and the bridle reins were knotted together. He hooked them over the saddlehorn, slipped to the ground and gave the horse a sharp slap on the rump.

At this unlooked for treatment, the cayuse broke into a run, on down the trail. It would take a sharp-eyed man high up the hill to make out through the intervening brush, that the pony now ran riderless.

Malcolm waited, while the sound of the hoofbeats thinned and died. Nothing happened, nothing stirred anywhere above, and he found himself listening, perplexed, to the perfect silence of the autumn afternoon. There was not even the rustle of a breeze.

That was one thing wrong: the silence. His own homestead lay just over the hill, on the east slope of the mountain. The land here had been added to his original holdings, and now formed a part of Black River Ranch. Even down here, on this far slope of the divide, on such a breathless afternoon there should have been heard the low, subdued plaint of Black River.

Hereabouts, as he well knew, the river ran through the channels of darkness which gave it its name, deep within the heart of the mountain. But right across the far side of the hill, not far back from his house, was the big cavern where one first glimpsed the river—where, from deep within the cavern, it came bursting savagely out of the black confines of the hillside, shouting, exulting in a taste of freedon.

Then, after running for only a couple of hundred feet, the river was forced back inside its grim confines again, protesting loudly after the glimpse of freedom; forced to flow for more than a mile in new darkness before, finally triumphant, it broke out a second time, and that time into full daylight, to flow on across meadows and between hills as a river should.

Always before, from here or anywhere within miles, like the stirring of a distant wind on the hill-tops, Malcolm had heard the turmoil of the river, swelling out from the cavern's mouth. Now there was no sound at all.

Perhaps his ears were no longer attuned to such sounds. In any event, it did not matter. His glance ranged the heights again, but

there was no stirring anywhere. Yet the gunman must know by now that he had scored a miss. What would his reaction be? Much depended on that.

Apparently, Malcolm decided, his would-be killer was an old hand at this sort of thing—not a man to go too much on what he saw or heard, nor one to be rushed. He must be settling down to wait this out, to see whether it was a trick on Malcolm's part, or if it was what it appeared to be—a frightened man, spurring, fleeing for his life.

A man who waited with such feline patience was no green hand, and therefore doubly dangerous. And that meant that there was even more to this homecoming reception than Malcolm had guessed.

But the years had taught him patience, too. He waited, and finally something did stir. His eyes focused on the spot, sharp, unbelieving. There was something there, all right—but a good two hundred yards too high up the slope, clear at the bald crest of it, in fact. That would have been too long a shot, beyond all reason—impossible particularly considering the accuracy with which it had been fired.

Still, someone was up there—but starting to descend the hill, not climbing, going in the open, making no effort to keep out of sight. Malcolm stared, and amazement overcame him for a moment. It was a woman up there! He could see that much, clearly enough. But what was a woman doing back in that lonely country?

Still he waited. The gunman must show himself now, it seemed, since the woman was following a course which would take her past where he must be hiding. She kept on descending, but nothing else stirred.

Well, he could climb himself, even if it increased the ache in him. He had, he hoped, some ability as a stalker himself. Malcolm began his advance up the hill, following the brush and trees while they lasted, then going up a slash of a coulee, taking advantage of its cover of brush.

When that was gone, he kept on, selecting points of cover, keeping a watch on the woman, more puzzled than he cared to confess as time went on.

He could not see her clearly now, but he knew about where she was. She had descended from the crest to near the spot from which he had been sure that the shot must have been fired. Now she was

loitering about there, and that was all. Nothing else was happening. There was still no sign of the gunman.

Well, he'd play a game himself. Malcolm stepped out into the open, still climbing leisurely. Presently he knew that the woman had seen him, for she moved a little, and then he could see her, standing alert, watching him—a little startled, like a disturbed fawn, gripping the rifle which she carried a bit uncertainly.

She was only a girl, he saw—not over seventeen or eighteen at most. Her dark yellow curls were tucked under a man's cap. She looked boyish as she stood there in dark blue levi's and boots, a man's hunting coat about her shoulders. Malcolm stepped around a clump of brush, paused for a moment as if just discovering her, and finished his survey more leisurely.

Startled blue eyes gazed back at him, and her breathing was hurried. The knuckles gripping her rifle had whitened. She had not raised it, yet its was in a position to be swung up quickly for defense, if need arose.

She was real enough—breathtakingly so, to a man who had almost forgotten what a woman looked like. But where was the gunman? How had he vanished? For Malcolm had covered the hillside, and there had been no sign of him. Was this girl in cahoots with him? What else would have brought her there? Yet how could she have helped a man to vanish, even so? Or why?

Advancing, Malcolm bowed a little—superbly, arrogantly, half mockingly. And the scarecrow effect of the man—his ancient, battered hat, the down-at-heels boots, the ill-fitting garments which he wore, detracted nothing from the arrogance or mockery.

The girl, in her turn, eyed him in increasing wonder. Who was he? Where had he come from? It had seemed to her almost as if he had burst forth from the mountain, full-grown. One moment she had been alone; the next he had been there.

And despite his motley attire, the outward garb of a tramp, the rest of him, the physical part, denied all that. He was handsome—the most handsome man that she had ever seen. That long, pointed black mustache, the arrogant face, the devil-may-care rakishness, were somehow both villainous and at the same time reassuring.

"Good afternoon," Malcolm said. "I hope I didn't startle you?"

"Startle me? she echoed. "Oh no—no, of course not. Only—where did you come from? Who are you?"

A second time, as haughtily as before, Malcolm bowed, though not quite so mockingly. This girl, he had decided, could not know anything about the shot.

He swept off his battered hat, held it on one knotted upthrust fist.

"Somebody made me welcome home less than an hour ago," he said, "with a bullet through my hat. Somebody who was standing right around here, to judge from the angle of the bullet and the sound of the gun."

Her eyes widened incredulously, but the twin holes were plain to see as he held out the hat.

"You were shot at?" she gasped. "I was on the far side of the mountain, and I thought I heard a shot. But I didn't know—"

"You didn't see anyone?" Malcolm asked.

She shook her head vehemently.

"No one. I—"

"Nor did I," he admitted. "Which is a bit strange, for I've been keeping a sharp watch. And nothing stirred until you put in an appearance. Nor has anything else moved since."

Her eyes again widened unbelievingly.

"But that's impossible—there must be some mistake—"

"You heard the shot, you said," he reminded her. "And these holes are real enough. Yet, as you say, it's right hard to figure." His next question was probing, ruthless.

"You came this way, after hearing the shot. Did you figure that you might know who was doing the shootin'?"

Again her eyes widened, this time, it seemed to him, with fear and dismay. She shook her head.

"No, I—why should I?"

"It was just an idea," he said easily.

She eyed him, her fright gone; but she was still puzzled.

"But I can't understand this. Whey should anyone take a shot at you?"

Malcolm shrugged, then smiled. The smile transfigured his lean, arrogant face, making it warm and winning for a moment. This girl, he was sure, was telling the truth; however impossible it seemed, the killer had contrived to get away.

"As to why anybody should take a shot at me, your guess is as good as mine," he said. "I sure enough wasn't expectin' it—for while it's maybe a fittin' welcome home, I didn't count on it."

"Home?" she repeated, puzzled. "Dou you live around here?"

"I did," Malcolm admitted. "Once."

"Oh." Her eyes brightened with understanding. "You mean you've been away to war?"

"A few years of it," Malcolm replied. Silence fell between them, and he knew that she was trying to think who he might be.

"I thought," she said tentatively, "that everyone who had gone away from this country had returned months ago—if they were going to return at all."

Malcolm shrugged again.

"That's as may be," he said. "You're new in this country since my day. Possibly you've heard of me. Possibly, but not likely. This is my land that we're on now. I'm Malcolm, of Black River Ranch."

He was watching her more narrowly than he seemed to do, and he saw the swift change in her face—the narrowed eyes, the quick paling of her cheeks, the incredulity and hostility.

"Malcolm," she repeated, and her tone had flattened, tightened. Then she flung up her head, and color burned where her cheeks had been white.

"I now begin to understand the welcome you just received," she said, and scorn was a hot thread in the chill of her voice. "Did you think that no one back in here would know of your record, Monty Malcolm? That we were too far out of the world to have learned how a son of this valley had disgraced it—of all the discredit you've brought on this land? We've no use for your sort—Benedict Arnold!"

Chapter II

She stood watching him as though expecting him to deny the accusation. But he was not even looking at her now. He seemed more interested in eyeing a small cottonwood tree which stood just behind her.

"Everybody knows your history—how you were a rebel spy," the girl went on blazingly. "I suppose you weren't actually caught at it, or the army would have shot you. But they knew what you were well enough to discharge you, dishonorably, from the army you claimed to be loyal to! And now you have the nerve to come back here!"

"Somebody else told me once that I had the gall of a government mule. And to anybody who knows a mule—"

Malcolm's voice trailed off, as though he were no longer interested in her or in her opinion of him.

"Oh!" she choked. "You'd better get right out of this country again before someone shoots straighter—next time!"

Like a small fury, she plunged past him, on down the hillside, without looking back. Malcolm watched her go—the proud line of her back, the fine set of her head above shapely shoulders—and for a moment his face softened wistfully. Then it became a bleak mask again as he turned back to what had caught his interest before.

It was a small thing in itself, and the casual observer would have found nothing odd about it. Just a broken twig, lying on a small patch of bare ground where it had been flung. A twig a few inches long, which had been carelessly broken from the tip of a cottonwood branch and then discarded.

His roving eye had seen it, had been held because of the condition of the twig. The end of it, where it had been broken off, was shredded to a pulp, as though it recently had been crushed between strong teeth.

Very recently. He picked it up and found it still moist with saliva. And it had come from the tree right there. Malcolm studied it, his eyes narrowing; then he slipped it into his pocket. There was some-

thing like regret in his eyes as he glanced again to where the girl was just vanishing, far down the hill.

For a moment he had been on the point of seeking to justify himself in her eyes. He had come back to the Black River country seeking rest and peace and, above all, forgetfulness. It was not easy to discard a dream.

But the war, for him at least, was far from over. Here was proof —where he had least expected to find it.

It was possible, of course, that more than one man might have the habit of plucking the tips of cottonwood branches and chewing them to a pulp, then discarding them. But he had never known of but one man who did that particular thing.

And the habit, considered in conjunction with that murderous bullet which had been fired from just about there, was clinching evidence. For both of them to have been the result of sheer chance would be pulling the arm of coincidence completely out of joint.

And there was, now that he stopped to think about it, a certain logic to the pattern. Might not the hunted have become the hunter? The things which he knew made that exceedingly plausible. And in such an event, what more logical hunting ground than this? Someone who was interested could have found out that he was returning, have been on the watch—

That was all well enough, so far as it went. Only it left huge gaps in the pattern. More to the point, where had the gunman disappeared to? Though he had watched carefully, Malcolm had seen no sign of him—aside from this broken and shredded twig, added proof that he had been there. But a man could not get back up the hill and over the crest without being seen. Nor down it.

And the girl, coming over the hill, should have seen anyone who moved. But she claimed to have seen no one.

Where did she fit into the picture? Malcolm was convinced that she had been telling the truth. Sill, something had brought her to that particular place at that particular time. There might be more than chance behind it.

In the old days, he had known every foot of that hill, since it was, more or less literally, his own back yard. But a more careful look around now revealed nothing new.

Malcolm finally climbed to the crest. If his cayuse kept on along

the trail, he'd come in due course around the long shoulder of the hill, and so to the ranch buildings.

He paused on the crest of the hill and, with an inborn caution, moved to where a cluster of boulders would shelter him. Here was a view worth the climb.

Off to the south and east, something more than a mile away, he could see Black River, where it finally burst out of the side of the mountain, then went rioting on like a new-loosed colt. Closer at hand, down below, more than half a mile from where he stood, set close up against the hill, were the buildings which he had helped to raise with his own hands.

He had filed on that particular parcel of land where the buildings now stood back in the spring of 1860. And he had received a tentative agreement from the local authorities that he would be allowed to acquire title the same as if he had continued to live on it, instead of going away to war; that his time spent in the army would be counted toward residence.

The years of '60 and '61 had been busy ones, and he had gotten a lot of work done, employing help as he could get it. The buildings had been erected, stout log affairs. The acquisition by lease and purchase of several additional pieces of land bordering on his homestead had given him the foundation for a ranch. Beyond and behind it, back in the hills, was plenty more land, free graze.

He had driven in a herd of cattle, and by the time he had marched away to war, it was all beginning to have the look of a real ranch. What to expect now, however, he had no idea. The years could make changes, frequently beyond the calculation of man.

Even with that philosophic reflection in mind, he was not prepared for the appearance of the buildings. No smoke arose from chimneys, either in the big log house or the long, low bunk and cook house standing a little way off from it. The corrals were partly filled, but not with horses. Cattle loitered there, enjoying the afternoon sun. The gates of the corrals stood open, so that they could wander in or out at will.

Malcolm's frown deepened. The ranch had an air of neglect, almost desertion. Then he saw another cow, and knew that it could only have just emerged from the house itself!

The girl had called him a Benedict Arnold, a spy and a traitor. Which meant that his record was known in the Black River country.

And five years was a long time. He knew now, without descending the hill, that he would find no trace of the crew whom he had left in charge, to look after things until his return. That look of desertion, of neglect, was not misleading.

Again he paused, listening. From up there on the crest of the mountain, he should have been able to hear the protesting voice of the imprisoned waters of Black River in their big cavern, hear them plainly. But still there was no sound at all. It was as though the past were dead, its last breath long since drawn.

From there, though he could see the buildings down below, it was not possible to see the cavern. He plunged into the timber, which grew nearly to the top of the slope on that side, rich and aromatic, a nearly solid blanket of pine and fir. For a quarter of a mile he descended through it, his steps soundless on the deep cushion of brown needles; the cloistered hush remained unbroken. Then he came out to where the hill dropped away more steeply, and paused in astonishment.

In the old days, here had been a vast crouching giant, or so it had seemed. A massive overhang of the hill had been carved and worked by nature into a fantastic shape in the course of centuries.

There was no overhang now, no giant. Sometime during the last half-decade, there had been a landslide, the weight of the unwieldy monster having apparently become too great. Now there was a long raw gash where the mountain had slipped.

Down below, where the cavern mouth had been, only raw earth was visible. The plunging slide had covered it over, hiding all traces of the cave. That accounted for the now mute voice of the troubled waters.

Hundreds of tons of earth had silenced them, burying them like his own once high hopes, Malcolm reflected grimly.

He went on down, skirting the edge of the slide, and entered the timber again. When he came out a second time, the ranch buildings were just below. The slide had been a quarter of a mile north and west of them, and so had not affected them.

Cattle looked up at sight of him, stared, and drew back uncertainly. A man on foot, as always, spooked them. Which seemed to be a good indication that no one had been near these buildings, on foot, for quite a while. Close at hand, the appearance of decay and the signs of neglect, were manifold.

His eyes sharpened as they rested on the cattle. Not one of them wore the Black River brand of which he had been so proud. All were branded, however, most of them with Buell Pearson's Tillicum iron. A few had the Wolf Track on their right shoulders. That, as he recalled it, had belonged to John Gordy, who had been new in the country when he left.

It was not necessary to look inside the house to know what he would find. The door had been wrenched open, then cattle had rubbed against it, breaking off one hinge, so that it leaned now at a crazy angle. Inside, the place was like a barn.

Malcolm stood in the doorway briefly, then turned back. For the moment, he'd had about all he could take.

The sun was about to set now; the cattle, uneasy at the presence of a man, had drifted away. He heard a noise, and saw his tired cayuse approaching. It had followed the trail around the mountain, and with the reins still fastened to the saddle-horn, so that it could not graze, it was glad to be caught again.

His mind made up, Malcolm swung to the saddle once more. He had expected to come there to stay, but the place was not livable now. He had hoped to bury himself back there, to forget and to be forgotten. Instead, he knew with bleak grimness that he had to show himself in public. It was the only way.

His mind drifted back over the years. He had had no thought of serving as anything more than a man in the ranks when he had enlisted in the army. But fate had taken a hand. Trapped behind enemy lines for two weeks, finally escaping by a bold ruse, he had been able to bring back some invaluable information for his commanding officer. Which had given that gentleman an idea.

The result had been his assignment to secret service work—spying, the other side called it, and with perfect justification, of course. That he had shown a real flair for that sort of a job had been acknowledged in one way or another by both sides.

He had soon found himself pitted against a counter-spy whose real name he had never known, since the fellow used a number of aliases; a man whose face he had never knowingly seen, at least not when well hidden by some disguise. A man whom he called, in his own mind, the Beaver.

As far as Malcolm had ever been able to discover, the Beaver had had but one weakness. His habit of breaking off cottonwood twigs,

shredding them with powerful teeth, and discarding them. Whereas some men chewed tobacco, he chewed twigs. Apparently no one had ever called his attention to that bad habit—bad for a man in the Beaver's position. If they had warned him about it, he would have quit it. And it seemed that he had not. It was something which he evidently did quite unconsciously.

Both men were active in the secret service of their respective causes. And they had clashed, more or less indirectly, time and again; until finally their clashes had grown to be almost as much a personal feud as a matter of duty.

Both of them had pulled more than one important coup. The Beaver, in Malcolm's estimation, was the most dangerous spy in the whole Southern camp.

It had been in a desperate attempt to capture or to kill the Beaver that he had been so badly wounded. Because of the necessity of getting the other operative, Malcolm had consented to the plan broached by his superior officer—consented to have it rumored about that he was suspected of being a spy and a traitor to his own cause. Following that carefully laid groundwork had come the final step—dishonorable discharge from the Army of the Potomac.

Malcolm knew grimly that that was a blot which would in all probability always stand against his record. It was a part of the price he had willingly paid. But in spite of that, he had failed in his larger objective. The war had ended, with himself still incapacitated, and he had lost all track of the Beaver.

Finally, with the job finished, and his last operation over, he had decided to return home. None of the things which had happened a thousand miles away should be known in the Black River Country. He could, he had hoped, find peace and forgetfulness. After five years of strife, that was all that he craved of life.

Yet here was reasonably good proof that the Beaver was still alive, and still intent on carrying the feud to its final grim end. It was a challenge, following that bullet through his hat, which could not be ignored. And if the conflict had been personal before, it had become even more so, for two reasons.

For he could guess that it had been the Beaver who had brought the news back here of his record, carefully spreading the rumor. Somehow the man had learned that he was coming home, and had set out to pave the way for him, to discredit him and to kill him.

The other, and even more impelling reason, was Malcolm's certainty that the Beaver would never have acted out of personal spite alone. Desire for vengeance would not be enough. There must be something even bigger. The war was over, but the Beaver was in the Black River Country, and something big was in the wind.

The cards had fallen. Let them lie that way. Unwittingly, perhaps, the Beaver had helped him. As an outcast, a renegade, he would find it hard going, but he was used to that. And in that role he could fight more effectively than in any other, as experience had demonstrated.

Chapter III

BALD BUTTE was a desolate hilltop, rearing above the lesser range of hills like an old gray wolf all set to howl. And Bald Butte, the town, cowering in its shadow, was a stark and unlovely settlement, set down in a deep valley, some fifteen miles from the borders of Black River Ranch.

Now that night had fallen upon the land, the blackness as always, seemed intensified down in the canyon-like valley, as though the town were in a pocket, and were in itself a sort of trap. And the scattered yellow lights of the town had the effect of making the night seem blacker still.

Verity McClay paused for a moment in the doorway of her own little place, her lower lip caught between small, firm white teeth. There was the pleasant homey smell of cloth in the big front room, for this was where she conducted her business as a seamstress, or, as the local populace called it, a dressmaker. Bolts of cloth were piled on shelves; three or four dresses and waists were in process of manufacture.

Mingled with that came other faint and equally pleasant smells—the smell of cookery, of spices and stored foods in the kitchen and pantry beyond where, in the back of the building, were her own living quarters. The two big tallow dips on the stand shed a cheerful light.

They showed Verity herself, standing a scant five feet five in her

high-heeled shoes, her straight black hair gathered softly at the back of her head, her deep brown eyes, the thoughtful, rather wistful look of her face, tinged now with a faint impatience.

Stooping swiftly, she blew out the candles, closed the door and turned the key in the lock. Ordinarily, she cooked her own meals and ate them alone, save on those rare occasions when her brother Case came into town from the Fishhook. Those were bright gems of occasions, the more so because they were so rare.

She had half expected Case to arrive today, but he had not. And she was tired of eating alone, tired of her own cooking, tired—she admitted it now, under her breath—of everything. Particularly of the shut-in town, of the whole cold North, tired most of all of the Yankees who infested the land like a plague of locusts. She was good enough to make dresses for them, but not good enough to associate with them otherwise.

Not, she admitted honestly to herself in the next breath, that she had any justifiable reason for resenting them being there, or their attitude toward her. She was the Southerner, the intruder, and they had a right to be as they were, to take pride in the fact that they had won the war. She should probably have stayed in her own land, among her own people. For at heart she was as ardent a zealot for the cause as she had ever been, as bitter about defeat.

But Case had come up here to get a job as a cowboy, pointing out, reasonably enough, that the war was over, and that the South was defated and impoverished. A man could do better among the Yankees, make a new start, and he proposed to do so.

The war years had been lonely ones, with Case gone, their parents dead. So she had come North that she might be near Case, might see him now and then. And she had done well enough with her needle. She had a flair for designing dresses, which had been recognized, albeit grudgingly. The wives of the big cattlemen were willing to pay well for that talent.

On that score, she could not complain. Her mistake had been in letting it be known that she was from the South, that her sympathies were unchanged. The friends she had hoped to make had not been forthcoming. There had been some who had offered what might pass for friendship, but she had spurned their advances hotly.

Now, she knew, she would sit alone at a table in the Bald Butte Restaurant, and people would nod aloofly or not at all. And when

the meal was ended, she would wish that she had stayed at home, despite the loneliness of the dragging evenings.

She turned down the street, her high heels making a quick, impatient tattoo on the plank sidewalk. A horse snorted from a hitch-rail; light pierced the blackness as the door of the Argus Saloon opened and a man lurched out unsteadily, almost bumping into her.

Verity drew quickly to the wall, and he did not see her. Loathing welled in her for such drunken cowboys, who wanted nothing else but liquor when they came to town. She could not understand how Case could like the life, but he did. She went on, turned quickly in at the restaurant, found a table in a corner, and sat down so that she could view the rest of the room. That was what she had come for—because she was hungry for the sight of people. No one had crossed her own threshold all that day.

She surveyed the room, aware that men's heads were turning covertly to glance her way, but ignoring them. There were a score of people eating there now, half of them ranged along the counter, the others at tables. She saw a big man at a far table whose companion spoke to him with a low laugh, saw him turn and push back his chair deliberately and start toward her, and her heart beat just a little faster.

That was Buell Pearson, owner of the Tillicum Brand. He was about thirty, she guessed, though he looked older. A big man, balding, he was developing a paunch, and his big nose was like a sort of cleaver in the middle of his face. Slow, stolid, respectable, and rather homely, Pearson was the big man in the Black River country, and destined to be bigger. And she knew, too, that he liked her—rather particularly, as he was now going out of his way to show, coolly contemptuous of what anyone else might think of the Little Rebel.

It was due in part to the fact that he did go out of his way to be friendly that she had been as well received as she had been. He had turned more than one good job of dressmaking her way. For that, Verity was grateful. But as to her reaction to his personal interest, she was baffled, uncertain, a little angry with herself. For she was one who seldom had any trouble in making up her mind quickly, positively.

Despite her lack of encouragement, Pearson liked her; with a little encouragement he would have been a regular caller at her door. And she realized that she could, if she wished, become mistress of the

broad acres of Tillicum, whenever she cared to set the date.

It was a temptation, for that would make her the biggest lady, socially, in the whole Black River country, would end forever the grinding poverty which she so bitterly hated, and would force those other ladies who had snubbed her to accept her as an equal.

Knowing all that, she had yet kept the thought well to the back of her mind. Now, at the look on Pearson's face as he approached her table, she knew that she could not put him off much longer. He was smiling, bowing, not very gracefully.

"Miss Verity!" he exclaimed ponderously. "The sight of you brightens up the whole room! I was hopin' to catch a glimpse of you while I was in town."

Verity smiled at him. After all, it was a pretty compliment, lending credence to what she had already suspected, that Buell Pearson was not nearly so dumb as he looked. And she was hungry for someone to talk to.

"That was nicely said," she agreed graciously. "Though completely undeserved, of course."

"It wasn't half the truth," Pearson insisted. "By the way, I was wonderin' if I could sort of combine pleasure and business. Mis' Beynon, my housekeeper, wanted me to get her a bolt of cloth for a dress. I was afraid I was too late gettin' into town. But if it wouldn't be too much trouble—"

"I'll be glad to show you what I have, later," Verity nodded. It was a clumsy excuse, for he could have found a wider selection at the Mercantile, if he had wanted just cloth, not a dress. And knowing Mrs. Beynon as she did, she doubted that his housekeeper had given him any such a commission. But she rather welcomed the business, at least. There would be a dollar or so profit in the sale of a bolt of cloth.

"Fine," Pearson agreed. "I'll go with you after supper, if that's all right."

He turned back to his own table, smiling and rubbing his fat hands together like a man who had just put over a good business deal, Verity reflected. Then, as he neared his seat, Pearson halted, stiffening.

The door had opened, and another man had entered the restaurant. Verity recognized him as John Gordy, of the Wolf Track Ranch. A tall man, with a droopy left eyelid which gave him the appearance of

always squinting. A man who carried two guns in tied-down holsters. A tough man, and proud of his reputation.

Wolf Track and Tillicum had common borders for nearly a mile, but that was all that they had in common. It was well known that the two cattlemen hated each other cordially. Buell Pearson had gone so far as to say, to Gordy's face, that he figured the Wolf Track herds increased a lot faster than nature could account for. At that accusation that he ran a long iron, Gordy had shrugged and demanded proof, which, of course, was not so easy to furnish.

Now, after a level look at Pearson, Gordy walked past, ignoring him, and took a seat at the counter. Pearson sat down, and the tension which had gripped the room for a moment was past. Men went back to eating, to talking. A waitress brought Verity her supper.

She was in the middle of the meal when the door opened again. Faces turned, naturally enough. Most of them stayed blank, showing that the man was a stranger there. But Verity, watching with quickening interest, saw that the man was tall, dark, handsome in a devil-may-care way, and that some of the old-timers, such as Pearson, had recognized him with a sort of shock.

Now the word was spreading, as such things do—running like flame in dry grass. The whispers had horror and amazement and dislike and incredulity in them, and caused Verity to eye the newcomer with still more interest. She too had heard his name before, and the tale of his many exploits.

For this, they were whispering, was Monty Malcolm. A man who had been in the Union army, but who was a Southern spy, if rumor spoke at all true. A daring, resourceful man who had once faced a firing squad for his efforts, and had somehow escaped alive. Who had been discharged in dishonor, branded a traitor—though the accusation had never been definitely proven.

Monty Malcolm, the original settler in the Black River Country, the original "big man" thereabouts. As a rebel herself, Verity felt a quick sympathy and interest.

He had stood for a moment, surveying the room with a coolness which amounted almost to arrogance. Now, as though totally unconcerned with the wave of hostility, which could almost be felt, Malcolm was coming forward, looking for a place to sit.

He saw that all the places were taken save one. With a little thrill, Verity saw that he was coming straight toward her own table.

Chapter IV

"If you don't mind?" Malcolm said tentatively, his hand on the back of a chair. He waited, looking at her for permission, and Verity's response was unhesitating.

"Not at all. Please sit down," she invited. "After all, these seats are open to all."

There was friendliness in her voice, a more than passing warmth. This man was like herself, an outcast, and for much the same cause. That was more than enough reason for being hospitable now.

But it was not that simple. Buell Pearson had half started to his feet, then seemed to think better of it. But as he sat back in his chair, Gordy was on his feet, leaning forward a little, resting both hands on the edge of the table. His left eye seemed to leer. Big knuckles stood out whitely, and his voice, though not raised, rang loud in the sudden silence of the room.

"Just a minute, stranger," he rasped. "Folks are sayin' your name around this room—and if it's what they say it is, then there's some things that we don't stand for in this country! Better take yore custom somewhere else!"

Malcolm, still holding the back of the chair, stood silent for a moment. Verity was looking up at him now, waiting, wondering what he would do. He did not have the air of a man who was either alarmed or worried by the challenge, she noticed. He turned his head slowly, almost wearily, to look at Gordy, and there was a current in the air as though a heavy thunderstorm were crackling overhead.

But again, before he could reply, Buell Pearson intervened. This time he scraped his chair back, making a loud noise in the silence, and came to his feet. His eyes sought Verity's rather than Malcolm's, and he seemed to speak to all the room, rather than to any one individual.

"Just a minute," he said, echoing Gordy's phrase. "Mebby there's some things we all agree on—but we still like to see fair play around here. I'm not sayin' that you're welcome back to the Black River

Country, Malcolm—not any. But we don't run a man out on an empty stomach. Set and eat before you go!"

Now, for just a moment, his glance raked challengingly across Gordy's, but Gordy, with a shrug, was reseating himself, and Pearson did the same, rather heavily. Malcolm still stood looking around the room, and he smiled a little—a mocking, derisive grin which seemed to encompass both men. Then, as though he had not heard any of the gibes, he pulled out the chair and sat down.

"It's a beautiful evening," he told Verity. "Just the sort to give a man an appetite."

Verity felt a quickening of excitement. By welcoming this man to her table, she had supposed that she would risk losing Pearson's interest, as well as the good opinion of the rest of the community. But Pearson had approved, and had prevented trouble for the moment—taking the opportunity to disagree openly with Gordy.

Yet trouble was only postponed until the end of the meal, and everyone knew it. When it came to a showdown, Gordy and Pearson would be found on the same side.

Malcolm considered that with a quick searching mind, as he would scan a new deck of cards. There had been no friendliness in Pearson—only a desire to impress the crowd with his antagonism toward Gordy. There had been no quarrel between them. It looked like a carefully staged act.

Most of the men in the room were eating rapidly now, bolting their food, as though anticipating what was to come, and anxious to be gone before it happened. Malcolm, on the other hand, was completely unhurried. He paused to chat for a moment with the waitress, gave his order carefully, and ate with slow relish. Only then did he venture to address Verity again.

"You're very kind," he said. "And I'm grateful."

"I'm a Southerner myself," Verity said defiantly. "And I like to see fair play."

Malcolm looked at her more closely, understanding. He had thought of her at first as just a pretty girl, but now he saw that she had some thing more than mere good looks—there was character as well. And the fact that she had been willing to face the resentment of the community by being friendly with him was significant.

Being from the South, her sympathies would be aroused, of course. Still, the average person in her position would have been doubly

reticent just on that account. She, plainly enough, was one who put principle above everything. That her espousal of his cause might have been misguided was not the question now.

And he sensed, in that same moment, that one motive for Pearson's intervention might well have been to impress this girl with his own desire to see fair play.

Malcolm supposed that there would be trouble when he had finished eating. This suited him well enough. He had come to town with that in mind. He would extract what pleasure he could out of the interval, and if it worried the rest of them, that was so much to the good.

"I'm still afraid that maybe this is an imposition on you, ma'am," he said gravely, "my pickin' this table. Though I didn't intend it as such."

"The Yankees did a lot of prating about freedom and human rights," Verity said with a curl of the lip. "Now most of them seem to have forgotten what it means."

Malcolm chuckled, aware that others had fallen silent to listen, and that every word they said was audible around the room.

"It's a whole lot easier to fight for a principle than it is to live up to it," he remarked sagely. And from that they went on, chatting lightly and inconsequentially like old friends.

The excitement of the incident had sent the color back into Verity's cheeks, which had been pallid of late. She was, Malcolm noted, very pretty, and gay now in a reckless sort of way, as though this were something which did not happen often, as though she were starved not for food, but for companionship.

His sympathy went out to her; he sensed that she was, like himself an alien in the land. He finished his pie thoughtfully.

"Maybe you'd better go now," he suggested to Verity, "before I do, just in case there should be any trouble."

"I'm staying," she said flatly, and swept the room with a defiant look. "If there's any trouble for you, they can count me in, too!"

Several diners had already finished their meals and left the room. But others were coming in, so that the crowd was as great as before—but these late-comers were not there to eat. They meant trouble, and it might be ugly. And now Gordy suddenly swung around on his stool, as though impatient at the delay.

"You've had yore grub, feller," he rasped. "Better get going!"

Malcolm tensed, then stood up. It was unlikely that they would let him walk out, now that they had crowded him so far. But they were giving him a chance to get away from the girl, and he could understand that. Then, unexpectedly, there came a new intervention.

Several of the newcomers were grouped near the door, and he had supposed that they belonged to Gordy's henchmen. They were all new since his day. Now one of the group stepped forward.

"Wait a minute," he said, speaking with a quick, nervous impatience. He was a tall man, stringy, balding, far from handsome, but with a dogged sort of determination written on his face.

"We don't aim to see this man run out of town nor out of the country," he asserted. "Not while there's plenty of other bad customers still stayin' in it." His glance raked across Gordy with unmistakable meaning, shifted deliberately to Buell Pearson, then back to Malcolm.

"I reckon you lay claim to ownin' the Black River Ranch, if you're Malcolm?" he asked.

"Why, yes, I sure do," Malcolm agreed, still wondering what it was all about.

"In that case, we're backin' you—even if you was the devil himself, and no disrespect intended," the tall man pronounced. "We've been pushed around lately all we aim to stand for. And we figger you're on our side."

Here was something new. Malcolm guessed that these men must also be ranch owners, engaged in some sort of a feud with the older, bigger landowners; presumably, since men like Gordy and Pearson were against him, they were disposed to make common cause with him. And it was all right whatever they might think of him, so long as they offered assistance.

It was Buell Pearson, his face turning a turkeywattle red, who answered this new challenge.

"You'd better keep out of this, Forbes," he warned. "Fair play's one thing—but there's some things we don't stand for in this country—not after fightin' a war to settle them. You won't make yoreselves popular by sidin' him."

"We ain't what you call popular anyway," Forbes said doggedly. "And I ain't so sure that we want to be, either—considerin'. As to a war, seems like we have one to fight our own selves. We're standin' by Malcolm."

Gordy seemed about to explode, but it was Pearson who spoke again, as if with forced restraint.

"If you're sidin' him just because you think he owns the Black River Ranch, Forbes, don't do it," he advised. "He lost all claim to that land a long spell back."

Malcolm had been listening to the exchange with an air of disinterest, as though none of it concerned him particularly. He was thinking of his old wound, scarcely healed as yet, wondering how long he'd be able to keep going when the show-down came. But he had never yet dodged trouble when it came his way.

Now, at this surprising declaration of Buell Pearson's, he swung around, startled by the brazen effrontery of it.

"And just how do you figure that, Pearson?" he demanded.

Pearson shrugged, like a bull moose emerging from a pond.

"With your record, you ask that," he said. "For yore own sake, Malcolm, better get out of here while I can keep things under control."

However it was meant, it was good advice—especially since Verity was there. But as he turned, she was on her feet as well, slipping her arm through his, smiling up into his face.

"Mr. Malcolm," she said, "won't you see that I get safely home, please?"

Malcolm saw a fresh flush across Pearson's heavy face, saw Gordy deliberately start forward. Promptly, one of the group from the doorway got in Gordy's way. There was the hard crack of a bony fist on an equally bony chin, and Gordy was still coming ahead, the other man was sprawled dazedly on the floor.

That was the trigger which touched things off. A gun-blast shook the room, the lights went out in the concussion and heavy blackness swept down, so that the crowding hills outside seemed to shove inward. Hands grasped at Malcolm, and he promptly lashed out with a boot, heard a grunt and the crash of a falling chair as a man collapsed over it, and, turning, set his back to the wall.

His chief thought now was for Verity, to get her safely out of there. She had championed him from the start, had made a gallant play to get him out of the room safely, but it had not been enough. Chivalry toward a woman was instinctive with the average man, but there were big thing at stake here—forces at which Malcom could only guess, but certainly big enough so that they wanted to kill him, and

without delay. Events of such import that men like Gordy would allow nothing to interfere.

Verity's hand was still on his arm, and the room was in an uproar, as everyone shoved and fought and cursed. There sounded the crash of breaking crockery as a table went over, a scream, a heavier jar. Malcolm knew now that this had been planned, intended as a concerted rush by Gordy's men to get him. But the intervention of Forbes and his friends had spoiled that, and now the darkness had brought about chaos.

With his back to the wall, Malcolm moved along it toward the dim-seen light of a window. Now, while they were baffled and unsure, was the time to get out. There was some risk in that, with Verity beside him, but less than in waiting until someone got a light.

He reached the window, tried it, and shoved it up suddenly. The darkness just beyond it was empty, and he boosted Verity through, then followed her as someone gave a warning yell. As he hit the ground and tried to run, Verity's hand found his again, guiding him in an opposite direction from the one in which he had planned to go.

"This way," she gasped. "They'll be combing the town for you!"

A light had sprung up in the restaurant again, and men were erupting from it. Gordy's voice bellowed orders, and in response to those directions, a search was fanning out in all directions through the town. If they found him now, they would be short shrift of him, Malcolm knew. That order to get out had been just talk. What they wanted was his death.

Someone was not far off in the dark. Malcolm heard a word gasped hoarsely:

"Maxi—"

The rest was lost in shouts and the clatter of hoofs as a horseman dashed down the middle of the street. Other men were not far behind them, running. Verity's breath was coming fast as they slipped into the deeper blackness of a looming building.

But now another group were surging toward them from the opposite direction. To run was to be caught, to stand still was to be discovered. This was homecoming—but not the peaceful sort that he had hoped for. Malcolm's fingers closed on his gun, but now Verity was fumbling at the door.

"Here," she said, and jerked it open, pulling at him, imperiously. "You'll be safe in here."

Chapter V

IT WAS too dark inside to see, but Malcolm guessed at once that Verity had brought him to her own quarters, and his heart warmed to her. She had that headstrong loyalty to a friend which he had come to admire in Southerners, and because she believed that at heart he had been with them in the struggle, she was for him now.

He stood still, listening to voices as the two groups met outside, the pounding of feet as they separated and took up the search again. Verity was calmly drawing a shade. Then he heard her moving about, and presently she lit a lamp. In the bright flare of it he saw the room and recognized if for what it was, a workshop where she sewed.

There was heightened color in her cheeks now, her breath still came a little quickly, but she was completely calm, and there was a faint smile on her cheeks as she looked at him.

"That didn't work," she said, and her tone was curiously matter of fact and pleased, like the purr of a cat washing its face in front of the hearth.

"No," Malcolm agreed. "Thanks to you."

"You got us out of there, when they figured that they had you trapped," Verity reminded him. "Though we owe a lot to Sam Forbes and his friends," she added thoughtfully. "You've had experience at that sort of thing before, of course."

"Plenty," Malcolm agreed. He wondered a little at that name which he had partially heard. Maxi—Max what? Probably it was of no importance. But it was an odd name, and that it had been breathed at such a time intrigued him.

Silence held between them for a moment. It was comfortably warm, very homey and pleasant in the room. It was a long time since he had been in any such place. Verity, he saw, took it for granted that this demonstration against him was because of what he was supposed to have done. To her, it was the war all over again—South against North.

"You'll be safe here," she said, and started as there came a knock

at the door. But after a moment her face was serene again. She pointed to a door leading into an inner room.

"Wait in there," she whispered. "No one will look in there."

Malcolm stepped quickly back as she instructed, closing the door behind him, all but a crack; he guessed at once that this must be her own bedroom. There was a subtle fragrance of perfumes and powders, a dress hung neatly across a chair back, a mirror which winked darkly across at him.

As he went through the one door, she opened the outer one. It was Buell Pearson who stood there, and who came, puffing a little, into the shop. Watching from the door crack, Malcolm saw that his eyes were darting, suspicious.

"I just wanted to make sure that you got home all right, Miss Verity," Pearson explained. "I'm right sorry that things had to happen the way they did—special while you was there." He gestured irritably. "I tried to stop it—but Gordy's a fire-eater."

"It was nice of you to try, anyway," Verity said, and the words were friendly enough, but her tone was impersonal.

"I'm sure glad that you got out of it, all right," Person went on. "I was right-down worried. Then I thought I saw a light here."

"I got out all right, and came right home," Verity explained. She smiled at him. "Won't you sit down?"

"Don't mind if I do," Pearson agreed. He twiddled his hat in his hands, his gaze still roving. "I hope you won't misunderstand, Miss Verity—about Malcolm. I like to see fair play. But it's sort of natural that folks should be set against him. He's a bad one."

"Is he?" Verity's gaze was steady, cool. Earlier in the evening, desperately lonely and eager to have a chance to snub the other women, she had been half minded to return this man's overtures of friendship. He was the big man in the Black River Country, and she knew that she could, if she wished, be Mrs. Buell Pearson. And once she held that position, no one would dare remember openly the things which were held against her now. That would mean security, even luxury.

She had been tempted, not by him, but by what he might give her. But now she spoke deliberately, burning her bridges behind her.

"Is he?" she repeated. "Is that why you're all afraid of him?"

"Afraid?" Pearson half rose from the chair, sank back again. "Why, what ever gave you that idea, Miss Verity?"

"The way you all acted," Verity said coldly. "Everybody pickin' on one man. Most generally, folks don't act that way unless they're afraid!"

Pearson stood up abruptly, his spurs jingling a little.

"I just stopped by to see that you got home all right," he said stiffly. "Since you did, I'll be runnin' along."

"Good night," Verity said, and her tone was uncompromising. Pearson hesitated briefly at the doorway, glanced again toward that other door, thought better of it, and went out into the night. Any door that had been opened between the two of them, Verity knew, had been fast shut now.

"So he had to come snoopin'," she said, and there was an angry spot of red in either cheek. "I don't like snoopers!"

She was rather an amazing person, Malcolm reflected as he stepped back into the room. A thoroughbred, no doubt of that. Her eyes were dancing as she looked at him.

"I haven't had so much fun in a right long spell," she added.

"I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate what you're doing for me," Malcolm said gravely. "But I'm afraid I'm makin' it harder for you here-abouts. So I guess I'd better be going now. I sure don't want to make it any worse for you."

Verity tossed her head.

"You stay a while," she commanded, "till things quiet down. They're still lookin' for you—and likely they'll be watchin' this house. That's the sort of man Buell Pearson is—I knew it all along, but now he's proved it! As to trouble, if it comes, I'm in a mood to relish it!"

Again, like an echo to this defy, there was a short, quick tap at the door, and just as quickly, before either of them could move, it was opening. Malcolm stood where he was, and after a moment Verity's face lighted up.

A man slipped in, closing the door quickly behind him. His gaze went from Verity to Malcolm and lingered there, and there was a curious blankness drawn across his face, like a mask. There was sufficient resemblance between these two for Malcolm to guess at once that they were brother and sister.

"Hello, Case; I'm sure glad to see you," Verity said. "This is Monty Malcolm, of Black River Ranch. We've been having some excitement in town tonight, Case. Monty, this is my brother—and

I want the two of you to like each other. Case works out at the Fishhook."

"Malcolm, eh?" Case drawled, and extended his hand with a slow grin. If he was surprised, he had his feelings well under control by now. "I've heard of you—special the last few minutes. This town's buzzin' like a kicked over ant-hill. But bein' unpopular in this town's a right good recommendation."

"Then I ought to qualify," Malcolm agreed, returning the handshake. "But there's a lot that I don't understand too well."

Between them, they explained what had happened at the restaurant, and since. Case McClay listened intently. Malcolm voiced a question.

"Part of it I can understand," he said, "about me being unpopular. But how come that Pearson claims my ranch? And why are men like Forbes backin' me? What's it all about?"

"Don't know's I can tell you more'n a part of it," Case admitted. "You've stepped into a lot more than you bargained for, looks like." He grinned slowly. "Understand, I'm just tellin' you what I've heard, sort of unofficial. I work for Ran Peters, who owns Fishhook. It's sort of easy to pull the wool over Ran's eyes, mebby—but still he's my boss. Likewise, him and Buell Pearson are good friends."

"You don't need to explain any of that," Verity said impatiently. "There's bigger things than wages at stake, and you know it."

"It's a land fight—or a water one," Case went on, more gravely now. "Way it really shapes up is this. You own Black River Ranch, Monty—or anyway, you did, when you left here. Pearson's Tillicum Ranch joins you on the down-river side. Then Gordy with his Wolf Track joins up with him. And my boss, Ran Peter, his Fishhook fronts you land on the other side—where Black River would be if it ran out in the open—which it don't, not up that way."

Malcolm nodded. That was all accurate enough, so far as the facts went.

"Then, on down-river, below Pearson and Gordy, come some of the other ranches," Case went on. "Forbes is one of the owners. There's Stapelton and Duggan and Fox, to mention a few more—and all of them depend on Black River for their water. They ain't like you, or Ran, or some others. If you didn't have the river, you'd still have plenty of water, what with springs and creeks and so on. The only water they've got at all comes from the river."

That was true enough. Most of the names were new ones to Malcolm, new since his time there. The greater part of the land, down-river from Tillicum, had been open range when he had left, held by others but without legal claim. That situation, of course, had changed with the years.

Running over that country in his mind's eye, he could see it again, could agree with Case McClay. There was plenty of water from Black River. But that was all there was, off down that way.

"The point is," Case went on, "that Buell Pearson is a land hog. He used to claim all that country, as I reckon you know. But these other fellers was smart enough to get hold of it, legal, and so they managed to run him off of it. He wants it again—and aims to get it back. The water's the key to it all. And *your* spread is the key to Black River."

"I still don't quite see it," Malcolm protested.

"It's right simple. About a quarter of a mile after the river busts out of the mountain and into the open, on yore land, it takes a sharp turn and flows off southeast. But there's a big hill, you'll remember, juttin' up there. If that was to be blasted down—as it easy enough could be—then it'd slide right across the river, damming it, so that it'd have to cut straight, instead of followin' the curve like it does now. It'd still run east, but more to the north. Likewise, it'd still run through Tillicum, and on across Wolf Track, but it'd be followin' a new course—which, the way it looks to me, the river must have used as a channel a right long time ago, before it got turned to flowin' the way it goes now."

He was silent, and now Malcolm could see the thing clearly enough.

"And if it was turned to that new course, it would miss Forbes and all the others, complete," he nodded.

Case grinned.

"Sure would, leavin' them high and dry—with not a drop of water on any of their land. All they could do then would be to get out—sell for what they could get—which would mean sellin' to Pearson, and mebby Gordy, at whatever they felt like payin'. There wouldn't be no other purchasers."

So he suspected, as Malcolm did, the Pearson and Gordy, despite their public quarrel, were really working together. Case went farther, giving precise details.

"I figure that Gordy's just a hired man for Pearson, doing his dirty work," he said savagely, "and that Pearson most likely owns both outfits. Mebby I'm wrong, but that's the way I size it up. Anyway, they sure work together. Once they got the land back, and had the water in their control, it wouldn't matter so much that there wasn't any water on those other ranches. They could make out to use them all right. So that's the size of it. Pearson's been claimin' for some time that Black River Ranch belongs to him. I don't know what he bases it on, but that's the claim. Now the others aim to back you—it's their only chance, and they know it."

Silence fell for a little while in the room, as it had now fallen outside in the town. This was a far bigger thing than Malcolm had guessed, and now that it had been explained, he could see the wide-reaching implications of it. Control of a whole valley was at stake, with a fortune in the balance. And for that, these men had already tried murder, and would stop at nothing to get their way.

There was only one jarring note, and he frowned as he considered it. That shredded twig, which looked like the work of the Beaver, and the man who had shot at him. Here was something else, something sinister and foreign, which did not seem to fit in with the other pattern.

"Reckon I'll have to have me a talk with Judge Kingery, and see what this is all about," Malcolm decided.

Case shot him an oblique glance.

"You got some friends, like Forbes and Stapelton and Fox," he said. "But the others have been pretty bold tonight. And Forbes and his bunch are pretty small fry, at best. They ain't got the power nor the guns on their side."

Malcolm shrugged.

"I've always figured to live in this country—and when my time comes, to die in it," he pronounced flatly. "But it'll take some work to plant me, for a spell yet."

Case grinned again.

"Reckon that's the place to say hooraw," he said.

Verity had listened, grave-faced. Now she stood up.

"You'll both have to spend the night here," she said decisively. "It's too risky for either of you to leave this house while it's dark. I'll fix up a shake for the two of you, here on the floor."

Case looked at his sister, a strange look which Malcolm could not quite fathom. Then he grinned again.

"I ought to be gettin' back to the Fishhook," he said. "But the way things are—guess it'll be interestin' to stick around a spell. Make up the shake, sis."

Chapter VI

MALCOLM AWOKE the next morning to the pleasant aroma of frying bacon, coffee and flap jacks. Verity, in her part of the building, was busily preparing breakfast, humming a little tune to herself. She sounded, to her own surprise, almost gay and happy.

It had been Malcolm's intention to leave the house before dawn, chiefly on account of Verity. But both Verity and Case had vetoed the plan.

"Reckon them that was all het up for a tar-an'-feather party 'll have cooled off a bit by mornin'," Case had summed it up. "Things always look diff'rent by mornin's gray light. In any case, you done nothin' to sneak away from. If anybody wants to make trouble for you for spendin' the night with friends, then they might as well have a good excuse."

So he had remained. Case stirred now, giving him an oblique grin, running his fingers over his stubble of beard. They washed, and went back to breakfast, and it was the most home-like meal that Malcolm had known in a long while. But there were too many things nagging at his mind for him to enjoy it much.

"You boys walk abroad and show these Yankees what a couple of real men look like," Verity commended, once the meal was finished "And don't forget to come around with a report now and then, for I'll be burnin' up with curiosity, same as a firefly. That means you too, Mr. Malcolm."

"I won't forget," Malcolm assured her. "And I can't say how grateful I am to you for all your kindness."

"We believe in the same things," Verity said softly. And the thoughts which Malcolm had pushed to the back of his mind came crowding out again, more persistently nagging than ever. What would

she think of him, once she learned the truth? He felt like a hypocrite.

Case was examining his own six-gun with considerable interest, twirling the cylinder, slipping it back almost lovingly into the holster. He looked at Malcolm again, and grinned.

"Let's sashay out into the sunshine," he suggested. "Give 'em a rare sight—for these parts, anyway."

They stood for a moment in the open doorway, together, and Malcolm saw two or three men on the street take rather startled note of them. Then the pair turned down the street.

"I'll be sort of hangin' around within' shoutin' distance for a spell," Case affirmed. "But I don't figger they'll be tryin' anything downright rough this mornin'. Daylight has a way of squeezin' the courage out of cowards that brag big by dark."

He turned down an alley, and Malcolm went on, warmed by this latest evidence of friendliness.

It was another fine autumn day, with all the promise of harvest time and fulfillment in it, the glory of summer's end. But there was a hint of storm in the air as well, a reminder that after autumn came winter.

He had gone only a little way when he saw a man come out of the restaurant, picking his teeth. It was Buell Pearson, and he saw Malcolm at almost the same moment, and seemed to hesitate. Then he commenced walking to meet him, still fiddling with the toothpick. It was of gold, Malcolm saw, catching the gleam of sunlight before Pearson thrust it into a pocket.

The big man nodded, almost as if nothing had happened the evening before. If he had ever been in danger of losing his poise, he had regained it now.

"Morning, Malcolm," he said. "Mebby we better talk this thing over."

"What's there to talk over?" Malcolm demanded.

Pearson lifted a shoulder.

"Not much, mebby," he conceded. "But aside from things that's happened away from this country, which we won't discuss—I suppose you figured on comin' back to yore ranch. Mebby you had some claim to it—not much, but some. You built the buildings there, for one thing."

"And that's not much eh?"

Again that lift of the shoulder, half defensive, half derisive.

"Mebby it is—to you. I aim to be fair. Fact of the matter is, the ranch already belongs to me. But I'll give you somethin' for the work you done there—say a couple of thousand dollars. And as much more for the cattle you had when you left."

"In other words, you'd like to make your steal legal by havin' me take a payment for it?"

"The legal part's not worryin' me," Pearson said amiably. "That was all attended to long ago. I guess some of us went off half-cocked last night—and I guess you know why. But the war's over, and it's not my business to skin other folks' cats for them. Some people ain't ever going to take kindly to you livin' in this country, and I'm givin' you a chance to get out with a stake. If you want to stay, that's up to you. Only I'm tryin' to be fair. Like I say, mebby we went too far."

"I still don't see where you figure that you have any legal claim on my land," Malcolm said flatly.

"If I tell you, you'll think I'm just being disagreeable," Pearson grunted. "Judge Kingery ought to be in his office by now. Let's step down there and let him tell about it."

"Suits me," Malcolm agreed. He fell into step alongside Pearson, wondering just how sure of himself the cattle king was, and what the basis for his confidence might be. For he did seem untroubled, almost indifferent.

Pierpont Kingery was judge of the district court. He was, Malcolm knew, an honest, upright man, rather narrow in his beliefs, bigoted in his opinions, but fair according to his lights. No unfair deal could have been made with his connivance, Malcolm was sure of that. Which made Pearson's confidence the more disquieting.

The courthouse was a frame structure, two stories in height. They tramped up the stairs to the top floor, down the hall, and knocked at a door. A big voice boomed out for them to come in, and they did so. These were the private chambers of Pierpont Kingery.

He was a big man, was Judge Kingery—not so tall as Pearson, but considerably wider, with a florid face and heavy, bushy eyebrows, above a full brown beard just beginning to be sprinkled with gray. Eyebrows and still heavy hair were nearly white, but aside from that, the judge looked like a much younger man than he was. His face was unwrinkled, his voice resonant with energy.

He was overflowing a big chair behind a desk which he rather dwarfed, and he looked up now to stare a moment; then his brows

twitched at the sight of Malcolm. But he heaved himself hospitably to his feet.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Pray be seated. And what can I do for you? A beautiful morning, I may add."

"Fine morning, Judge," Pearson agreed. "You remember Malcolm, I suppose?"

Again the judge's brows twitched together.

"Perfectly," he said shortly.

Malcolm took the conversation away from Pearson.

"We've come to discuss my ranch," he said. "When I left here, years ago, Judge, you had just been appointed to your position by the territorial governor, and there was the understanding that the time I served in the army would apply toward my homestead title. As I figure it, I should have a clear title by now, without question. But Mr. Pearson here tries to tell me that I've no claim to my land at all."

"Mr. Pearson is quite correct," Judge Kingery agreed. "The homestead law of the United States intends to bestow benefits upon its loyal citizens. According to what is known of your record, Mr. Malcolm, you can hardly come under that classification."

"And why not?" Malcolm challenged him. "I enlisted in the Union Army, as everyone knows. I've just now returned from that service."

"You enlisted in the Union Army, yes. And you have just now returned," Kingery admitted. He seemed to be holding himself in check by a strong effort of will; his face was purpling a little. "You might like to tell us, perhaps, why you have just now returned—nearly a year after all the others who served have come back—and what you've been doing during that interval."

Malcolm shrugged and spread his hands.

"There's been a lot happened in five years, Judge," he said, "mostly routine. What has that got to do with it?"

"What does it have to do with it?" Kingery stood up, towering over his desk, and now pent up wrath exploded out of him. "You have the colossal, unmitigated nerve to come here and ask me that? You, a known traitor, dishonorably discharged—who should have been shot! Did you think that we didn't know your record here? That you could disgrace this valley by returning and living here again? Black River! It seems to be more aptly named than we had suspected!"

He paused a moment, breathing heavily. The judge had always been a rabid unionist, Malcolm remembered, and apparently his convictions had hardened with the passing years.

"Under the law, no traitor can hold land from the federal government," he went on wrathfully. "I think that answers your question in full, Mr. Malcolm. All that I regret is that I have no authority to deal with you as your crimes warrant!"

He sank back in his chair, mopping at his face with a big handkerchief. Malcolm had listened, not at all surprised, and outwardly unmoved. Secretly he was almost elated.

If he chose, he could probably convince Kingery that he was mistaken. Likewise, there was land which he had bought for cash, and to which he held title, which made up a good part of the ranch, and which would be unaffected by any of this, though they seemed to have forgotten that.

But to show them that would be a tedious and involved process, and it would defeat his purpose. Now, unwittingly, they were playing his game—making him an outcast in fact as well as in name—the thing which a good spy had to be. Now he could go ahead, taking a hand in this game.

For there were big stakes being played for here—the control of Black River Ranch, of Black River itself and the other lands to the east. Gigantic stakes, involving the fate of half the men of the country.

And he was convinced that there was something else too—something so much bigger that the rest was dwarfed. It was only a hunch, as yet. But the Beaver would not be in that country to play a mere game of marbles.

Casually, Malcolm stood up, and his words were even.

"I wonder if it has ever occurred to you, Kingery, that you could be mistaken, like other men? I bid you good-day—gentlemen!"

His ironic bow took in both Kingery and Pearson. Then he went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Chapter VII

THERE WAS a loitering Mexican on the street as Malcolm returned to it. His south-of-the-border finery was more elegant and elaborate than most cowboys could afford—yet that was what, outwardly at least, he seemed to be. Malcolm watched him, a little puzzled. Mexicans were rare in that section of the country.

He was likewise a little at a loss as to what his own next move should be. He was forced to play the game pretty much in the dark, and the cards had been carefully stacked against him to begin with. He'd have to watch until he found an opening—and be careful of his step while he was doing it.

After that outburst of the judge's, which was sure to be spread abroad by Pearson, he would have no legal status in the country. He would, in fact, be counted as a fair target for any man's gun.

It was doubtful now if even the other ranchers would back him, since Kingery had ruled that he had no right to Black River Ranch. Still, there was no harm in seeing where he stood with them.

Luck was with him there. A couple of riders had just entered town and were dismounting before a hitch-rail. One of them was Sam Forbes. The other would of course be a friend of his.

They looked up at his approach, and Forbes' long face brightened a little. His greeting was warm.

"So you're all in one piece yet, eh, Malcolm?" he asked. "I'm right glad to know that."

"So far, yes," Malcolm agreed. "I was wantin' to thank you for sidin' me last night."

"Nothin' to thank me for," Forbes protested. "We was just playin' our own game—and seems like we're all in the same boat, so it's only common sense to work together. Meet Dick Stapelton. He has the ranch on down-river, next to mine."

"Right glad to know you, Malcolm," Stapelton agreed, as they shook hands. He was a little, wiry man, with sandy hair and a twisted sort of a smile. "They're sayin' a lot of mean things about you—but then, the things they say about some of us, like Sam and me, for in-

stance, ain't exactly complimentary, nor made up complete of the truth. Besides, I always like to judge a man on his own stack-up,"

"Yeah," Forbes agreed bluntly. "And if you was the devil himse'f, Malcolm, we'd side you if you'd side us. You know what the situation is, what we're up against?"

"I've just heard about it," Malcolm agreed, and added dryly. "I was up to see the judge now, too."

"Kingery? And what did he say?"

"Plenty. Claims I've no legal right at all."

Stapelton grinned unexpectedly, bristling like a bantam rooster. But some the light went out of Forbes' face.

"That makes it bad," he said.

"They're overlookin' one thing," Malcolm said, wanting to comfort these men a little. "My homestead counted for some land, of course. But most of my ranch I bought from others. And they can't shake my title on that."

Quick hope came back to their faces.

"Kind of puts a diff'rent face on it, eh?" Stapelton asked.

When he left them, it was with the promise that they would back him, with force if necessary, when he was ready to take over his ranch again. But for the present he preferred that the opposition should believe that they had him licked.

He was tempted to return to the dressmaking shop and tell Verity what he had in mind, then decided against it. He had involved her enough as it was. And when the final showdown came, she would probably hate him, considering him a worse traitor than the others now thought him. His mouth twisted wryly. Duty led a man into devious paths.

Securing his horse, he rode out of town. No man had tried to molest him, as Case had prophesied. Daylight made a lot of difference.

Today, he did not head directly for Black River Ranch. Instead, he swung east, to have a look at those other outfits which were involved in Pearson's proposed steal, to refresh his memory concerning the watershed.

The situation was pretty much as Case had related, and his admiration for Pearson's shrewdness grew. During the spring and early summer, there would be enough water holes on these other ranches for such cattle as might be turned to graze there, without the river.

So, if he controlled the land, Pearson could get the full benefit of the grass without being bothered about water. When the holes dried up, the grass would have grazed off, and the herds could be moved closer to the river.

But for those who now owned the land, there was no such easy solution. They had to live there twelve months in each year. After the water holes dried up, if the river was gone, they would be put out of business. It was as simple as that.

Back on his own land, Malcolm studied the layout again, from a distance. It would be entirely feasible to change the course of the river. A blast would shake down that overhang, blocking the channel completely. And it would then be virtually impossible ever to turn it back to the old channel, with such a big dam in the way.

Black River Ranch had the same look of desertion today, but he was taking no chances on that. Leaving his horse in a coulee bottom where the grass was good, he approached the buildings on foot, careful to keep well hidden. It was likely that they might expect him to return there, and so they might have prepared a welcome of the sort that he had received across the hills the day before.

But nothing stirred as he explored. He was nearing the buildings, coming up another deep gash of a coulee which was more like a canyon, with trees and brush growing thickly in and around it, when he halted in surprise.

Here was something decidedly out of the ordinary—even if nothing could have been more ordinary. Dirt, plain dirt, but fresh. A great quantity of it.

It had been dumped there in the coulee bottom, dirt dug from somewhere. Unless one stumbled upon it as he had done, there was nothing to indicate that dirt was there—yet there were tons of it. It looked as though it had been dumped down in there so that no one would see it.

That was strange. Why should anyone be doing any digging around there? And if so, why go to the trouble of hiding the dirt? It didn't seem to make sense.

How had they gotten it there? It would have required at least a wheelbarrow, and a great many trips would have been necessary. But he could see no trail nor sign of wheel tracks. Then he did find something—several planks, likewise hidden in the brush. So the barrow had been run along on those, to avoid leaving a trail.

Evidently it had been at least several days since this project had been put in operation, for he could not tell where the planks had been laid. Thoroughly intrigued now, he set about finding out. Anybody who would do all that work, digging and hauling so much dirt, and go to so much added trouble to conceal it, must have had some very excellent reason for doing so.

This was a remote spot, and had been under the control of Buell Pearson for the last several years. If anybody wanted to dig, why not do so openly? The natural conclusion was that the secrecy would be to keep Pearson or his crew from discovering the project. Yet it was apparently Pearson who was doing the big plotting in connection with Black River Ranch.

But if Pearson was responsible for this, why hide the dirt? Judging by the amount of it which had been dumped in the coulee bottom, more than one man had been employed, for a good many days, or weeks, of hard digging.

Malcolm could see no sign of where the dirt might have come from. There was no open hole, none showing back in the edge of the hill which here crowded clear up to the edge of the buildings. And it was hard to figure what anyone would dig for, hereabouts. So far as he had ever heard, there was no likelihood of any mineral deposit.

Malcolm next went through the buildings, one by one, but there was no clue there, no sign of any digging that he could find. His eyes darkened a little at the ruin which had laid waste to his home in the years since he had left. If he ever lived there again, it would be easier, cheaper, to raze the house and start anew than to try to clean it up and repair it.

Yet Buell Pearson had offered him a couple of thousand dollars, ostensibly for the buildings. And Pearson was not a generous man, nor actuated by unselfish impulses.

A sudden idea came to him. He had made a rather thorough search, without finding where all that dirt could have come from. But the house was set close up against the shoulder of the mountain, and behind it there was an old shed-like lean-to which was built against the side of the hill. The door leading to this had a clutter of debris in front of it, stuff which apparently had been years in accumulating.

For that reason he had passed it by. Now, however, he swept the stuff aside, grunting a little with the old pain of his still-scarce-healed

wound, then shoved the door open. And now he knew that he had stumbled upon the secret of the dirt.

Back in there was a hole—just a black hole, leading back into the hill. It was wide enough for a man to stand and dig in it, but no bigger than necessary. And this hole had not been dug very long before.

Chapter VIII

THE THING was both intriguing and puzzling. Why anyone should go to all that work, and do it secretly, in that remote spot, was hard to figure. Yet it seemed certain that no one would do such a thing without some impelling reason.

It might be risky business, exploring there, if someone should return while he was in the tunnel. But that was a part of the game.

There was no equipment for digging around anywhere—no lantern or wheelbarrow. But he had a hunch that the tools might be stowed a little way back, inside the tunnel, and that proved to be the case. He found a lantern, sloshed it to make sure that it held coal oil, and lit it. Then he observed that the tunnel, instead of leading straight back into the hill, slanted sharply upward, almost as steeply as a man could conveniently climb.

It had been braced and shored where that seemed necessary, but no more than was required, and the whole operation had an amateurish look about it, as though whoever had done the work had been no skilled miner, only someone desperately anxious to get a hole back to somewhere—or something.

And there was something else, lying discarded and forgotten. A broken piece of twig, once chewed and shredded by powerful teeth. Excitement ran like fire in his blood. The sign of the Beaver!

He studied it a moment, wondering at the connection. It seemed far-fetched that a spy of the no longer existent Confederate Army could be connected with a hole in the ground there in the Black River country; so far-fetched as to border on the ridiculous. Yet that bullet-hole in his hat was a powerful piece of evidence.

He climbed, noting carefully that the lantern burned steadily, proof that the air was good. This was some matter for wonder in itself,

since the passageway was going deep into the hill, still ascending. The digging must have been hard, requiring a tremendous amount of work. With the attendant dangers of bad air, slides, falling rock, how had it been managed?

Here was something to give him pause. He bent lower to examine it, and saw that it was a long flat stone, laid at the bottom. A cross had been roughly chiseled on it. Not far away was a second similar stone.

Here were grisly monuments. Men had died doing this job. And they had been buried where they fell, evidently to hide all their traces from the outer world. But their comrades had at least marked their graves in this simple manner.

Yet the job had been persisted in, despite such a cost. Why? There was no sign of any ore, or of a possible vein. The hole simply led on and upward, as though the diggers had intended to burrow straight through the mountain.

The light flashed on darkness beyond, and he saw a side shaft, leading off horizontally. Malcolm hesitated briefly, then followed it. It led only about fifty feet, then stopped. But now it had an unfinished look. There was a pick-axe here, a shovel, and some loose dirt, as though the workers had gotten that far and then had knocked off for dinner.

Certainly the work was very fresh. Malcolm stared at it, puzzled. And then, gradually, he realized that the silence which had been all about him at the start was no longer unbroken. There was a faint, jarring rumble of sound—a noise which had grown so gradually that at first he had not been aware of it.

Excitement coursed through his veins again as understanding came. He had heard that noise before! They must be close to the big cavern—these men who had been digging—to the cavern which the slide had covered over, burying with it the ceaseless voice of Black River. And this sound from not far beyond was the penned up river itself, still imprisoned, still protesting.

Apparently the whole tunnel had been dug in an effort to reach the cavern again. But why? Had something been hidden there, before the slide of earth had covered the cave—something of such value that men would go to all this trouble to recover it?

It was a long chance, but it seemed the most logical explanation. And now, from all indications, they were finally close to their goal.

But why the secrecy? And what did his return have to do with this thing, that they were so anxious to be rid of him? Where did the Beaver fit in?

He turned back to the main tunnel, which still led upward. And now one thing was noticeable. It sloped off at a different angle, and the work there had apparently been done less recently. He followed it, climbing.

Up ahead he finally perceived a faint glow—daylight. Not much, for the opening, as he saw when he neared it, was set cleverly between big stones, with a clump of brush hiding everything from the outside. But up here, as he had guessed, he was on the opposite slope of the mountain—close to the spot where that shot had been fired at him the day before!

It seemed a logical guess that the diggers had first tried tunneling down to the cavern from that direction, but that the air had gotten too bad. Temporarily abandoning it, they had then tunneled upward from the other side. What was more important, showing considerable skill both in engineering and mining, they had managed to join the two shafts, so that now good ventilation was provided.

And they were running that cross-wise shaft to strike the cavern.

That much he could figure out. But why had they not dug straight in, through the new slide that had first covered the big cave? It would have been a lot shorter, though perhaps not too easy. There would have been considerable risk, in the new soft slide, of starting a fresh slide which might sweep all their work and themselves to destruction. And this, of course, could not have been done in secrecy. Apparently the need for secrecy was vital.

About to poke his head out, like a gopher from its burrow, Malcolm tensed suddenly at the sound of voices. They came from not far off. Taking a careful look, he saw and recognized the speakers, a stone's throw away.

One was the girl who had been there the day before, who had so bitterly denounced him as a traitor. The other was Case McClay.

"I still think that you're a funny cowboy, Case," the girl was saying. "Seems like you're never on the Fishhook, never on the job. You're always turning up in unexpected places—like here, now."

Case laughed softly.

"Don't you reckon mebby there could be a reason for that sort o' thing, Anobel?" he asked. "A right purty reason, that attracts men

like sugar draws flies? I'll admit I got the habit of kind of turnin' up where you're around at."

Anobel Peters colored a little, but it was easy to see that she was pleased. Even so, she was not to be put off so lightly.

"You sure got a soft-soapin' tongue, Case McClay," she said. "But I don't think it's me you're interested in half s much as it is something else."

"Me, I'd climb the highest mountain to tickle the angels' toes—or to talk to one, same as I'm doin' now," Case grinned. "If that ain't a good reason, you show me a better one."

"Oh, I can't argue with you, Case," she protested. "You always get the best of it. But just the same, I don't see how you do it—unless you've got wings, too."

"Ain't never been accused of sproutin' them before," Case sighed. "But mebby it's the associatin' has done somethin' to me. I shouldn't be surprised none at the influence."

"Well, I must be getting home," Anobel declared. "I don't suppose you'd care to ride with me, Mr. McClay?"

"Now it's Mister," Case sighed. "Seems like ever' time I open my mouth, I put my foot in it."

"You aren't riding with me, then—Case?"

"I'd sure admire to, Anobel. Only most cayuses don't like to carry double. And I left mine down the other side of the hill here."

"That's what I mean," she declared. "Who ever heard of a cowboy leaving his horse and using his own legs? You're no real cowboy."

She moved to her own horse, swung into the saddle, waved to him, and rode away. Case stood lazily watching her go. And then, as he turned, Malcolm realized belatedly that Case must have reached the top of the hill by the same route which he had followed—which meant that he was going to return by the same tunnel.

Hastily, Malcolm duck back, blowing out his lantern, retreating as rapidly as possible. There was suspicion in Anobel's mind, that was easy to see, and now there was suspicion in his own. Had it been Case McClay who had been up there the day before? That opened up a wide field of not too pleasant speculation.

The knowledge which he had gained of the passageway was handy now, Far behind him, where a gleam of light showed, Case had lit a lantern of his own and was following leisurely. The fact that he came

with a light showed that he had no suspicion that anyone else was ahead of him.

Since he could feel his way along by putting a hand on either side, Malcolm was doing well enough, more than holding his own. But what if he should encounter someone else in the tunnel—someone coming up while he was going down?

Like an answer to the thought, he rounded a gradual bend in the passageway, and heard a man cursing softly to himself, there in the total darkness ahead—as though his lantern had either gone out, or had perhaps been broken, leaving him in a plight which he did not relish.

There was nothing to do but to keep going, with the faint hope that he might get by in the blackness before the other man realized what was happening. Malcolm kept moving, then tensed as a reaching pair of hands, apparently groping for the wall, closed suddenly on his arm.

Chapter IX

A SOFT SIBILANT oath ripped out. This was no cowboy talk, but a tongue different from English, which Malcolm guessed must be Spanish. This other man was both frightened and a little bewildered by what was happening. Evidently he had been quite certain that he was alone in the tunnel. And almost anything which happened in there had an eerie quality which could shake the stoutest nerves.

But the other man's reaction was swift, as deadly as that of a rattlesnake. When Malcolm gave no answer, but tried instead to get loose with a quick twist, his opponent's fingers only closed the tighter. Then one arm looped out, and Malcolm butted his head forward instinctively, saving his neck from being encircled in a grip which would have twisted him off his feet.

The shock of his skull against the big man's chest—for by now Malcolm realized that the man was huge—foiled that trick, bringing a grunt from him. But that was all. Where it would have knocked the breath from most men, or put them out of the fight for a while, it only made those big arms grip a little tighter, like the hug of a grizzly bear.

Aside from the grunt, his opponent made no sound. Apparently he did not think that anyone was around who would help him. Or perhaps he was well satisfied in his own mind that he did not need any assistance. His first moment of fright over, he was settling down to what had to be done with the solid enjoyment of a dog digging for a buried bone.

He might be more than half right in his hunch about not needing help, Malcolm decided ruefully. If he was to get away, or to put up a fight against such odds, which his own body still racked by old wounds, he would have to act fast. He swung a stiff jolting right at the head bending above him, and felt his knuckles crack on a fleshy chin. But again the only result was a grunt.

By now he has twisted his other hand loose from that first encircling grip. He found his gun and jerked it up, knowing that he should shoot and be done with it, but not quite able to bring himself to

murder save as a last resort. He lifted it as a club, for one hard clip beside the head would end the fight.

It was halfway up, and his elbow was starting to straighten, to swing back for the stroke, when a big paw slid along his arm and twisted the weapon away as effortless as if he had been a child. It seemed as though he were in the grip of a veritable giant, there in the darkness inside a mountain in the grip of the Old Man of the Mountain.

Now he was being lifted, by a great hand on either arm, close up to his shoulders—lifted, so that already his feet were pawing for the ground. He knew that sort of fighting. It was the usual preliminary to slamming a man down again—and in this case, such treatment would just about finish breaking his already racked body. And within a matter of moments, Case McClay would be coming along.

There was just one chance. Malcolm kicked, and felt his boot sink into the soft belly of his opponent. There was another whooshing grunt, this one like that of a punctured fish bladder. Then the grip of the big hands relaxed a little, and with a savage wrench Malcolm twisted loose.

Solid wall was up against his back as he landed on his feet, and he could feel the hot breath of the now thoroughly angered man right in front of him, knew that in a moment the attack would be resumed more fiercely than before. He tried to slide to the side, and an outjutting wedge of stone blocked him. Now—

Suddenly it seemed to Malcolm that the angry earth itself was taking part in the disturbance, shaking, bellowing its wrath.

It came from below them, from around them, from overhead—from all about—a dull, reverberating thunder, muted and hollow, like the cough of a monster, seeming doubly ferocious because of that. With it was a trembling which seemed to shake the very foundations of the earth, the insecure earth which was all around them. To be caught there, deep inside a mountain in convulsion, was terrifying. It seemed as though a giant had the hill in its grip and were shaking it—just as the Old Man of the Mountain had been shaking Malcolm a moment before.

In the next instant, Malcolm revised his first opinion. This was not the result of a giant's rest being disturbed, of secret places violated, but an earthquake. And this other giant of a man was even more

terrified than he was. Malcolm could hear him whimpering, like a small and badly scared boy—or perhaps a little puppy dog.

It was a sound of pure dismay. And coming from the throat of a man who had toyed with him as this fellow had done, it did more to restore Malcolm's confidence, to set his mind to working again, than anything else could have done. Then again, swiftly, he revised his first guess.

This was no earthquake, moving its way through the recesses of the hill. It was something far worse than that. Disaster, probably. But for him, at the moment, salvation.

He was quick to take advantage of it, pawing his way past the other man, now too badly frightened to make any attempt to stop him. Then he was almost running on down the inky blackness of the passage. For him, at least the catastrophe had been well timed.

It was something which would bring fortune to one or two, and ruin to the rest of the valley. Now the noise had ended, the shaking had stopped. It had been no earthquake, but a tremendous blast which had been set off. And that could mean only one thing. Buell Pearson had lost no time, when confronted with this new challenge. He had used dynamite to shake down the overhang, to pour its torrent of rock and dirt into and across Black River, damming it, so that now the course of the river would be changed!

This drastic action, coming so suddenly, was something for which neither Malcolm nor the other ranchers had been prepared. It confirmed Malcolm's first estimate of the man, that Pearson was ready now to risk everything in a bold, ruthless fight to get what he wanted. And it was only too probable that, with that one stroke, he would have won his objective, past any hope of fighting back.

The descent, in the black interior of the mountain, seemed endless now. But finally Malcolm caught the welcome gleam of daylight ahead, and presently he was out in the dazzling sun. For a few moments the light was so bright that it hurt his eyes. Under it, things close at hand seemed unchanged, the buildings were as deserted in appearance as before.

But off in the distance, a haze of dust still hung in the air, like a giant mushroom, just now slowly dissolving. It showed all too clearly where the blast had been, grim confirmation that his guess had been correct.

Getting his horse, Malcolm headed that way. His chief feeling now

was one of regret—not so much for himself as for the other ranchers who were thus brought face to face with disaster—and with a situation which it seemed was already irrevocable, like death itself.

He saw now that other men were there ahead of him, drawn by the blast and the dust, a lot of them coming to take stock of the damage. Then, coming closer, he was a bit surprised to discover that they were divided into two groups.

One bunch was made up of Buell Pearson, with most of his crew behind him—a grim-smiling crew who were thus openly admitting that they had done this thing, and inviting trouble if it wanted to come. Pearson apparently had decided on a bold course at last.

The other group was made up of the little ranchers—Malcolm could see Sam Forbes and Dick Stapelton among them. A half-dozen men in all, pitted against a group twice that size, impotent in their wrath and fairly choking upon it.

Few indeed could blame them, on viewing the result of the blast. The great overhanging hill, which had crouched there above the river like a surly dog about to pounce, had made good its truculent threat. Countless tons of rock and dirt had come tumbling, spilling out into and across Black River to the far high bank, building a wide-reaching dam which already had some of the same solidly formidable look about it which the hill had once worn, as though it had settled itself where not even the push of the thwarted river could disturb it.

Baffled and angry, cheated thus of its new-won freedom from the mountain walls which had held it in thrall, the river was restive as a new-roped cayuse. It was pushing at the barrier of the dam, seeking for any possibly weakness and, turned back upon itself, beginning already to build up a lake.

There was no question as to how it would ultimately behave. It would swing off in the new course, away from the old channel, leaving the land down-river high and dry, desolate in its thirst.

Already, below the barrier, the water was draining away, leaving pools where frightened fish flopped in dull anticipation of disaster. Rocky bottoms were beginning to show, the stones starting already to dry in the sun, like an animal picked clean of its meat, leaving only the skeleton to bleach.

None of the angry men had yet noticed Malcolm. Their attention was too fully focussed upon each other. Stapelton suddenly spurred

his horse ahead, reining up defiantly close to where Buell Pearson sat, solid in the saddle.

"Damn you, Pearson," he screeched, his voice breaking shrilly in his anger. "You're a devil straight out of hell!"

Pearson seemed more amused than resentful at this display of temper. His face widened in a grin.

"Kinda poor loser, ain't you, Stapelton?"

"Poor loser? Hell, I can take a lickin' well as any man, in a fair fight, if I got it comin' to me. But there ain't nothin' square about this, where a man can't even fight—nor about none of yore methods!"

Pearson shrugged. His face lost some of its good-nature.

"My methods work," he said. "That's the test that counts. This ain't a soft country—nor one for soft men. I warned you that it belonged to me, and to stay out of it in the first place. You wouldn't listen to me. Now you've nobody but yourselves to blame."

"Is a man expected to turn back every time a snake rattles?" Stapelton cried. He was rapidly working himself up to the point where he would go for his gun, in spite of the hopeless odds against his group—reckless of the fact that it would mean suicide for himself, and for his friends as well, if they did anything except stand helplessly by and see him killed. Forbes, more cool-headed, saw this and intervened.

"Easy, Dick," he cautioned. "Easy, now. We'll do somethin' about this—but this ain't the time nor place."

Stapelton did not take his venomous gaze off Pearson's face.

"You're always sayin' to take it easy, Forbes—an' now see what it's got us," he said bitterly. But some of the truculence went out of him. Sensing that, Buell Pearson shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I made you an offer for your land a while back, boys," he said. "It still stands—today. Mebby I won't be in so generous a mood, say a week from now. Think it over."

"An offer?" Stapelton sneered. "Robbery, that's what it was. A tenth of what it's worth. You'll never get a foot of my land, Pearson."

The others watched in silence. Pearson merely swung his horse disdainfully. His silent alert crew still clung to his heels—gun-hawks who would like nothing better than an excuse for trouble.

As he turned, Pearson's glance discovered Malcolm not far away. He had been about to swing his own cayuse and ride off. For a moment, the eyes of the cattleman narrowed with a look of vindictiveness

which changed to calculation. His broad face lightened in a smile again.

Casually, he lifted a hand in greeting. His voice was clearly audible to everyone there, as he put his horse to a trot.

"Thanks for the cooperation, Malcolm," he called. "I appreciate it a lot." And he was gone his riders at his heels—leaving Malcolm at the mercy of the sudden wild anger of the dispossessed.

Chapter X

IT WAS A STROKE of fiendish ingenuity on Buell Pearson's part. Balked by superior force of numbers, faced by gunmen far more than their equal, the ranchers had been forced to swallow their rage and choke on their pride. Now, all in a moment, Pearson had given them an outlet for their anger, a perfect scapegoat on which to hang the tattered rags of their own frustration.

Malcolm saw in their faces as they turned to look at him. Already, Pearson was almost forgotten. It was Stapelton who first set spurs to his horse, with a savage lashing stroke which sent little spurts of blood from the side of the surprised beast and set it to rearing and plunging, before it yielded to the insensate fury of its rider and headed for Malcolm.

Stapelton was in the lead, but the others were not far behind him. Forbes came last, his homely face troubled and uncertain. But there was no lack of certainty, no hesitation on the faces of the others.

The five of them had drawns guns now, covering him. Seldom had Malcolm seen such anger on the faces of men. They had endured for a long while, these men, had fought a game but losing battle for survival. And they had been lifted up to hope, only the night before —hope and faith in him, that he might do something. Now, cast down to the depths, they believed that he it was who had betrayed them.

"You damned Judas!" Stapelton raved. "Sellin' us out that way! You've always been a traitor an' a skunk—but this time you've gone too far!"

The fact that they had befriended him the evening before made his betrayal seem doubly heinous in their eyes. Malcolm was surrounded, dragged roughly from his horse. He said nothing, made no attempt to fight back, knowing that it would only earn him a savage beating which he was in no shape to stand. The irony of the thing was doubly bitter.

Had he had a gun, he could have held them off, or have had some hope of escape. But he had lost his gun back in the tunnel. To try

and outrun them would mean being shot down before his horse could get well started.

And to try to explain, or to deny what they now believed, would be only a waste of breath. If they had been in a calmer mood, it might have worked. But they had been forced to eat crow today, and such humiliation demanded an outlet. Denial was worse than useless.

Stapelton hit him across the mouth, hard. One of the others kicked him. In a moment more, the pack of them would have been upon him, like mad dogs hungry for a victim. But Forbes stopped them.

"None o' that, boys," he said sharply. "We ain't beasts. Let's have fair play here."

"Fair play? What do you call fair play?" Stapelton snarled. But they drew back a little, sullenly vengeful. "Ain't he sold us out—the dirty sneakin' Benedict Arnold?"

Malcolm saw then that the same belief in his own treachery, the same rage was boiling in Forbes too. Only his sense of fairness had restrained them this far. But he was in no mood to be appealed to.

"I reckon he's all o' that," Forbes agreed grimly. "But I shoot a hog 'fore I stick it! We got some self-respect left, I reckon, even if we ain't got nothin' else!"

"Yeah, you're plumb right," one of the others agreed. "We'll do this right. But I reckon there ain't no question as to what he's got comin' to him!"

"String him up to the nearest tree!" Stapelton grated. "The dirty double-crosser!"

"Yeah, lynch him," was the prompt agreement. "He's got it comin'. And besides, we'll be doing a favor to the country."

There was no dissenting vote. It seemed to Malcolm that there was a faint regret in Forbes' face at the turn in events and the drastic nature of the reprisal. But he said nothing in opposition. They were all heading on foot toward the hill and the trees which skirted its base, hustling him along as they went. It was only as they neared the trees that one of them remembered that they had no rope.

That would not delay them for long, however. Their horses were still standing where they had left them, with dropped reins, and each man carried a lariat on his saddle. One was instructed to go bring a rope. And now it was Stapelton who took note of Malcolm's silence.

"Ain't you got nothin' to say for yoreself, Judas?" he taunted. "Ain't you goin' to try and crawl out of it?"

Malcolm shrugged. There was a bright blue sky overhead, and the feel of sunshine on his skin had never been so warm and pleasant. But you played a game like this as it came, and if the cards went against you, it had always been his philosophy that you still took it as it came. Inwardly his soul might cry out in protest against the injustice of the deal, but he could hold his head up and take it, and that was something.

"What's there to say?" he demanded. "Would you listen to me if I tried?"

"You're damn right we wouldn't listen you—not if you denied it on a stack o' Bibles," Stapelton said venomously. He had automatically elected himself to leadership, and the others were willing followers. Now his eyes narrowed calculatingly.

"Wait a minute, Brodie," he called to the man who had started after a rope. "Mebby that ain't what we want—at least not right here."

"What do you mean?" Brodie demanded, turning back to face them. "Sure we want to string him up."

"You can get the rope," Stapelton conceded. "Get mine. Then nobody can kick about it bein' sliced up."

"Why slice it up?" somebody wanted to know.

"Strikes me that we don't want to just lynch him," Stapelton explained, and now all the frustration and hate in the man, the underlying vindictiveness of his small nature, was coming to the fore. "That's too quick an' easy a way for a dirty traitor like him to die, way it looks to me," he added slyly.

As before, the others, with the possible exception of Forbes, were quick to follow his leadership.

"Reckon that's right. Hangin's too common for the likes of him. But what you got in mind?"

"Somethin' that I figger 'll be poetic justice," Stapelton responded, "seein' as he's responsible for what's happening'. Come on. An' get the rope."

He turned and led the way back; the bunch of them still herded Malcolm in their midst, still prodded him with gunbarrels if he seemed to hesitate. Back they went toward the edge of the newly made dam across the frothing river, to where the lake, spreading out, rose slowly but steadily.

Brodie, hurrying, rejoined them now with the rope. He shook it

out, grinning crookedly, explaining with a touch of jubilation in his voice:

"I didn't take yore rope, Stapelton. This 'n's mine. Be puttin' it to mighty good use, way I figger."

"Bring him down here," Stapelton ordered. At this point, there was a pile of rocks, rough, jagged and unpleasant, where a rocky section of the overhang had spread itself in the silde. The stones varied from a foot in size upward to the size of a wagon box—a wild jumble of them among which the muddy waters crept with little sullen lappings.

"Reckon, when you come right down to it, he's more guilty in this than anybody else," Stapelton went on. "So, since he sold out to Pearson, agreein' to this water bein' turned and penned up here—looks to me like he'd ought to really get to enjoy it—get a fill of the water he's takin' away from us, not to mention starvin' cows and dyin' calves. And we want him to have time to think about them things while he's dyin'."

His plan was clear enough to the others now, and they fell in with it with the same eagerness which they had first shown in agreeing to the lynching. Back among the piled and jumbled stones, with a bigger one looming overhead and smaller ones on either end shutting off all view from above, they tied Malcolm fast, first slashing the lariat rope into four lengths. One piece was fastened about each wrist and ankle, then run to a solid piece of rock and made fast, so that presently he was spread-eagled, lying fact upward, completely helpless.

Even without the ropes to stretch and hold him fast, it would have been no bed of roses. His left foot was high and dry, but the right one, a little lower down, was in water which reached nearly to his knee. A rough point of rock under his back, gouging unpleasantly, and to lie there long would be exceedingly painful, so much so that he would soon welcome the slow-creeping death of the rising water.

That would take perhaps an hour, or perhaps twice that long, depending on how fast the water continued to rise as the pent up river spread out. There was no slightest doubt, however, that it would soon cover him, leaving him ten feet under water before the lake leveled off as th river found a new channel and release again. And there, buried deep under the waters, he would be left until the stout ropes finally disintegrated.

A look at the faces of his captors showed Malcolm that it would be folly to ask for mercy. Normally, these were decent, respectable men. But they had been humiliated and defeated, brought to the verge of ruin by what had happened that day, and it had put a sort of madness in them. Lacerated pride demanded that they in turn be given a chance to punish someone.

By the next day, once their passions had cooled and revulsion had set in, they would shrink in horror from what they had done. But by that time it would be too late.

"Mebby we better gag him," someone suggested. For now that the job was done, none of them seemed disposed to linger to watch the working out of their vengeance.

"What for?" Brodie demanded. "He ain't got no friends—even if anybody did hear him."

"Just the same it's a good idea," Stapelton grunted. "And that much more unpleasant." He took his own not overly clean handkerchief, stuffed it unceremoniously into Malcolm's mouth, and used another to fasten it there. "Chaw on that," he grunted.

They had sobered by now. But their common purpose still held them together. Stapelton looked warningly at Forbes.

"Don't try sneakin' back to help him get loose," he growled. "He's only gettin' what's comin' to him."

"Reckon I'm in this as deep as any of you," Forbes grunted, and Malcolm heard the sound of their boots clambering up the rocks. Then they were out of sight, and the last sound had died away.

He knew with certainty that none of them would be returning. He was sure of that as he was of the fact that he could do nothing to help himself. Always before when things had gone wrong, no matter how tight the fix he had been in, there had been some way to fight back, to do something.

If the ropes had been rawhide, for instance, which would swell and stretch as it grew wet, he might have had at least a ghost of a show of working himself loose before the water got too deep. But the lariat, he knew, would only shrink and pull tighter as it got soaked.

No one else was likely to come near that spot. Even if someone did, he could not see Malcolm, nor guess that he was there—and the gag was effective. And as had been said, he had no friends anyway, with the possible exception of Verity McClay. And she certainly would not be coming out there.

She alone, of those in this land which had been his country, might hold a vague regret in her heart for him, when he did not return. But she, like most of the others, would probably suppose that he had sold out to Buell Pearson, then had taken the dirty money he had received and left the country. The six who had planned his punishment would not brag about it, once they had had time to think it over.

He could hear the water now—creeping in among the stones, finding a new opening, perhaps momentarily plugged with a bit of soil, washing that away with a little rush, sucking, gurgling.

Now both feet were under water. It was creeping up so that he could feel it about his left arm and shoulder, which were somewhat higher than his feet. It was beginning to lap at his neck—icy cold water, only newly freed from inside the sunless caverns; bitterly cold, almost numbing.

His position had grown painfully stiff and cramped as time dragged on. He estimated that he must have been there for nearly an hour. Another half-hour, perhaps—and by then, as the water reached his nose and mouth, he would be past caring.

It was an ignominious way to go out, at the end of a long career, and with his reputation hopelessly blackened for all time. And to go by the hands of his friends!

That was the irony of it. To be killed by an enemy was the expected course. That those who were on your side should do it to you, however—that must be causing Buell Pearson to chuckle now. There would be high laughter in hell tonight.

He started, straining desperately at the ropes. The stones to which they were fastened would not yield an inch, nor could stiffened muscles. But there is was again—unmistakable, this time. Footsteps, on the rocks just overhead.

Someone, only a few feet away, was walking leisurely about, probably making a survey of the dam and the lake. Sudden hope and desperation were born in Malcolm. It was no shout, only a strangled sort of a moan which tore past the gag, but it was a sound of sorts.

Malcolm tried to repeat it, and could not. The footsteps had stopped, then started again. His hearing seemed doubly acute now. The sound seemed to be receding.

And then, just as hope was dying in him and the waters lapped at

his cheek, close to his mouth, he saw a man come into sight, lower down now, almost on a level with him.A man, chewing placidly at a cottonwood twig, shredding it between powerful teeth. He lowered his gaze and saw Malcolm at the same moment, and stood stock-still, frozen with shock. Case McClay.

Chapter XI

THE BEAVER! Case McClay, brother of Verity! Malcolm was incredulous. True, Case had been on the mountain, up above the tunnel, and he had made a sudden and unexplained disappearance. But still it had seemed improvable that he could be the notorious spy, the opponent whom Malcolm had fought against for so long in devious ways. Case was such a mighty nice fellow, and he was Verity's brother!

Yet it all fitted—even to the gun-shot which had been a fraction high and had drilled his hat. And the two of them had slept under the same blanket only last night!

Case was staring, incredulity of a different sort, then bleak understanding, in his eyes. He slowly took the shredded twig from his mouth and held it, staring at it as if with new understanding, looked back to Malcolm's face, then tossed the twig aside with a little gesture of finality. He stood there then, hands on hips, staring down at Malcolm, and the bleakness had spread across his face.

"It's funny," he said, speaking as if to himself, "how you get into a habit—mebby a silly but mighty bad one—and never even know it. Reckon I've been scatterin' those twigs for you to find for a long time now. Eh?"

It was impossible for Malcolm to answer, but Case seemed to read the answer in his face. His own softened a little and grew curiously regretful.

"They got you in a bad fix, ain't they? Mighty bad. The dirty buggers. Here I come wanderin' down to have a peaceful look at what's going on—and here you are. And of course it was you in that tunnel back a while—scarin' poor Toby out of a year's growth. Not but what he can stand that well enough. He's plenty big."

He shook his head, and it was plain enough to Malcolm that he was talking not so much for Malcolm's benefit as for his own.

"It's right-down cur'us, the way some things work out. Here I've spent a long time hatin' you, feller—always sort of buildin' you up in my mind as kind of an ogre, I guess. And you've been tough—

plenty tough. I never imagined that if I met up with you, you'd be anything like what you are. And then, last night, I walked in—and Verity said she wanted us to be friends! Made us sleep under the same blanket—eat the same grub!"

He broke off and stared down, his face set and harsh again, but the regret was still in his voice.

"I sure wisht I hadn't met you last night—or else not now. But I guess you're a reasonable sore of a man, Malcolm. You've played the game, same as I have, for a long time, and you know the rules. And there's a big stake here—I guess you know plenty about that, too. You always was too smart for yore own good—or mine."

He shook his head, turned about, and one foot slipped into the water, becoming soaking up to his ankle. He drew it out again and looked down.

"Golly, is that water cold—"

He broke off, staring down at Malcolm, at the water creeping up about him. A sudden redness suffused his face.

"I'm sorry," he blurted. "But I guess you can see that I ain't got no choice—though I'm right sorry that it had to end this way. But be reasonable, man. I didn't do this—not me. I aint that much of a skunk—not quite. Sure I'd shoot an enemy out of the saddle, if I could shoot straight enough—but that's in the line of business. Nothin' personal about it. And it's quick and easy. And you've been a hindrance that I just couldn't afford to have around no longer. A man's duty comes first. You know that, dog-gone it."

Malcolm could understand what was passing through the man's mind. Case was arguing with himself. Malcolm had done the same thing, more than once in the past. Duty—that was the watchword. When a man took on such a job as had fallen to their lot, duty had to come first—before family, friends, comfort, honor—even life itself. Duty. A small word, a fine word—and yet it sometimes led you down bitter trails. He sympathized with Case McClay, knowing just how he felt.

The water was at Malcolm's mouth now. He could taste a bit of it, brackish from the disturbance. The rock under his back was still gouging him, so that it seemed as if his back would break with the strain of it. The water was bitterly cold, almost numbing. Well, it wouldn't be long now—not very. He wished that he could tell Case

McClay that he understood, that he didn't blame him, that he too knew that a man's duty came first.

Others defending the lost cause had surrendered, but Case had not. That was the difference. He still fought for what he believed in—risking reputation and life itself. They were alike in that. It was a bitter irony that they should have been pitted against each other all these years, only to meet now—and in such a manner.

He, too, had thought of the wily, deadly Beaver as somewhat of an ogre—less a man than a machine, a menace to be disposed of if and when the chance came—just as Case had regarded him when he squeezed that trigger the day before. Or was it a month back? It seemed a long time ago. Anyway, there had been nothing personal in it. It was only a job to be done.

And yet, had things only been a little different, they might have been friends—very good friends, probably. Death was close now, and at its imminence, Malcolm's mind seemed to have a new clarity, a sort of dispassionate understanding which was hard to come by in the heat of struggle.

With that understanding, he knew that they were alike, he and Case McClay. Alike in their hopes and their ambitions, as in their work. And if Case had been in his place, and he standing there in Case's boots, he would have felt the same sort of regret. But a man had to do his job, particularly when something big and vital was at stake.

It was unfair for a man to be burdened with regrets for something for which he was not responsible. He saw Case staring at him, saw him scowl again and flush redly.

"I'm sorry, Monty—damned sorry that it has to be this way," he growled. And for a second time he swung sharply about and strode out of sight.

Only for a moment. Abruptly, Malcolm could hear the sharp tattoo of his high heels on the rocks as he came back. This time his face was grimmer than ever, but he held an open knife in his hand.

He reached down into the water, slashed the rope which held Malcolm's right foot, then the left. Splashing ahead, he severed in turn the ropes which held Malcolm's hands. And now he was cursing—bitterly, fluently.

"Blast you," he said. "I hope you drown before you get out of here!"

Chapter XII

THERE WAS no surprise in Malcolm. He had known all along that Case would do this thing, even while refusing to hope, to admit it to himself.

But now, having cut the ropes, Case was turning back, leaving Malcolm to his own devices, defiantly proclaiming by the gesture as by the words that he had done enough, that if Malcolm was now too weak and cold to save himself, it was no concern of his.

Self-preservation is the oldest and most compelling of all instincts. It was easy enough to roll off that rock under his back. His first heave, of half palsied muscles, did that for Malcolm. But that, it seemed, was his limit. His whole frame was racked and strained by the unnatural posture, his blood had almost ceased to circulate, the chill in him had crept up until now the flesh, however willing, was unable to respond to the impulses of his mind. His face went half down in a new puddle of water, and he could not find the strength to rise. His back, newly released from its cramp position, screamed in protest.

For a moment, the steady, bitter flow of Case's invective came to his ears. Then Case's hands were under his arms, lifting him, helping him to his feet. With Case guiding, half carrying him, he managed to stumble up and out, to where there was dirt and a little grass well above the water line, where the sun still beat warm in its late afternoon splurge.

He sank down and lay there, panting and exhausted. And for a long moment Case stood above him, scowling—the scowl belied by a strange twitching of his mouth.

"My pappy told me once that if I started a job, I should go through with it," he growled. "Well, I always aim to do that! We've been warrin' a long spell—and I reckon likely we'll keep right on, till one or the other of us finishes the other off.

"But we've fought fair—according to our own code, and the rules of the game. And what they was tryin' to do to you wasn't fair.

Well, you can look after yourse'f now—or lay here an' die, if that's the way you feel about it. It ain't none of my business."

He turned away, then swung back for a final word.

"Darned if Verity wasn't right—but from now on, Malcolm, it's war to the death if you get in my way! Don't forget!"

Malcolm was still terribly cold. But there was a warm feeling in him, warmer even than the sunshine, a feeling which seemed to start at his heart and spread through him. Even a few moments of relaxation from that awful strain had set his blood to coursing again, and now his muscles were beginning to respond. Malcolm managed to sit up.

"Your quite a man, Case," he said quietly. "More than I used to figure, even!"

"I'm a fool," Case said bitterly. "And you're another. But I take the cake."

Case reached his horse, swung into the saddle and rode away without looking back. Otherwise the horizon was empty.

Malcolm stretched flat again. The years had toughened him past all belief. Now that his cramped posture was relieved, and with the warm ground beneath, the warm sun beating on him, he would soon be all right again.

It was nearing dusk when he stood up, a little stiff and sore, but conscious again of hunger, of a well-being which he had hardly hoped to feel again. No one ease had come near the place, and that was understandable. Whatever qualms the men from downriver might be feeling, now that their passions were cooling, they would be certain by now that the thing which they had done was irrevocable, and so would shun the place like a plague-spot.

Off some distance, he saw his own horse grazing quietly. No one had wanted to have anything to do with it, either.

He pondered his own course as he walked to catch the cayuse. And in the end, he decided to return to town. He needed food, and a bed. And now that things had happened as they had, he might as well go boldly. He had a feeling that, while men might eye him askance, they would shun him now rather than fight him. Except, perhaps, for Case McClay. Whatever the stake was, they had still to fight for it. And that was the most bitter irony of all.

By now, Black River was beginning to find the new freedom which it craved. Originally it had burst out of the mountain, flowing east

and a little south, the swinging gradually more to the north as it ran.

Now a trickle of water was starting to spill across fresh meadowlands, questing with the same rushing sort of eagerness as a small dog running ahead of a boy. Malcolm viewed it soberly. Buell Pearson had gambled here, and it looked as though he had won.

Now, instead of keeping to the east and a little north, it would swing farther to the south, through Tillicum, by-passing the lands which once it had watered. A big gamble, certainly, had been involved here.

But there had been a bigger one, in which Case, and probably Pearson too, had had a hand. It had something to do with the river, with the cavern, but Malcolm had a feeling that it was otherwise unrelated to the land-grab. The one was being used to cover up the other.

It was restful to be in the saddle again. There was a sore spot in his back, which would probably be there for several days, and a great weariness in all his body. Otherwise he was doing very well. The deadly chill was gone from his bones again, though the night air had a brash touch. He put his horse to a gallop, eager to reach food and a bed.

As always with the coming of night, Bald Butte was hidden behind a curtain of blackness. Remembering his first meal there, Malcolm chose a different restaurant, and then regretted his decision, wondering if Verity might again be at the other one. Yet that, he guessed, was unlikely.

Few customers were on hand tonight. Those who ate eyed him in a sort of furtive silence, but he doubted if anyone had recognized him. Yet there was a curiously strained atmosphere. Long experience had made him sensitive to such things.

Supper made him feel better. He paid his reckoning and left, of a mind to find a room and a bed. But when he was out in the night, that feeling of strain was intensified, rather than lessened. Men on the streets were few and far between. Those who ventured abroad skulked with the furtiveness of frightened rabbits. Nowhere were there the boisterous sounds of a drunken cowboys celebration, none of the ordinary noises of an evening in town.

On a sudden impulse, Malcolm decided to seek out Verity. He told himself that he wanted to be sure that all was well with her, particularly since she had antagonized the town by siding with him.

But he knew that his main reason was that he wanted a glimpse of a friendly face, a word with her. Somehow that latter seemed important.

Some distance short of her shop, he had a sudden feeling that there might be more validity to his fears for her than he had suspected. Here, at last, were men—a score of them, perhaps, gathered openly enough in the street. The moonlight came over the edge of the canyon wall and lessened the gloom, so that it was as though ghosts moved in the street. Then one of them spoke, a thread of nervousness running through his voice.

"Ah cain't say ah like it. Seems like we'd ought to do somethin'—if we're men a-tall!"

Another voice answered roughly:

"Shut up, you fool! This ain't no time to meddle—even if you was once from the South! And anyways, you ain't no man!"

Malcolm saw the first speaker then—a dwarfish figure which moved with a painful ungainliness, a man with some old injury to foot or hip which caused him to lurch painfully as he walked. He growled something deep in his throat, but subsided.

And now it seemed to Malcolm that these men were watching something on down the street, through he could see nothing. That lame man had been from the South—and Verity was a Southerner! What did it mean?

He could see a light in her shop window, which was reassuring. He was about to go ahead, when there came the tramp of hoofs and jingle of bridle reins, and half a dozen men rode out of an alley, pulling up to join the group who already waited there. One of them was the saddle-filling figure of Buell Pearson; those behind him were from Tillicum, of course.

They, too, seemed to be watching something on down the street. And now there was no doubt in Malcolm's mind. It was Verity McClay's house which they watched. Again the lame man voiced a protest.

"Ah tell yo', gents, ah don't lik' it. That big furriner goin' in there, bullyin' a lady around, like as not! Are we all goin' to stand fo' that happenin', heah in Bald Butte, and not lift a fingah?"

The answer was in Pearson's voice—an answer surprisingly like the other one which the lame man had received, save that there was an undercurrent of gibing laughter in Pearson's tones.

"Stand for it?" he repeated. "Don't be a fool? There's things going on around here—good things, maybe, to keep out of! If there's any trouble for her, it's not of our making—so it must be of her own! Under the circumstances, we'll not interfere! Best get along home, you men!"

It was more an order than a suggestion. Most of them did not even hesitate, but scattered like frightened quail. Only Pearson and his crew were left, there in the dark street. And the boss of Tillicum was making it abundantly plain that, since the happenings of the night before, his position in the community had changed. If he had furnished any protection for Verity McClay in the past, that protection was now withdrawn.

Buell Pearson was not a man to take lightly a public affront such as had been offered him the night before.

Chapter XIII

IT HAD BEEN an uneasy day, such a day as Verity had known when two armies were locked in battle, not many miles away, with destinies large and small a-hinge on the outcome, with rumors flying thick and fast, and the growling mutter of guns drawing gradually closer, closer—

She had hoped that such days were over and done with. Here in this little, remote town of Bald Butte, a thousand miles from the nearest battlefield, it had seemed to her that never again could such doubts and fears beset her. Yet today had equalled any of them in strain.

At first, she had supposed that it was only herself who was worried, who turned in quick apprehension at every sudden noise. Monty Malcolm had ridden out of town, a man hated and in danger of his life. Case had followed presently. And in those two facts alone was ample cause for fear.

But as the day wore on, she had come to see that the uneasiness which she felt was part of a general uneasiness which pervaded the community. And her thoughts, made swift with nervousness, picked on various isolated and until then scarcely recognized things, and began to make of them a strange, uneasy whole.

There were the strangers who had been coming and going, furtively for the most part, and at irregular intervals, ever since she had first come to Bald Butte. Strange, foreign-looking men. Two or three times they had come to the shop. On had asked no questions, had merely pretended that he wished to buy a dress for an acquaintance, but had gone away without making any purchase. She remembered now that, though his conduct had been irreproachable,she had been relieved to have him go.

Others had made furtive inquiries about Case. They were little things in themselves, of which she had thought nothing at the time. But there had been other strangers in town today, and she saw, as night approached, that the citizens were apprehensive about their purpose, that they seemed actually to be afraid. Which seemed, on

the surface, an absurd thing, since these strangers were so few, and had done nothing overt. Yet she had that same feeling of impending doom.

Then, late in the day, definite news had come—terrible news, which boded little good for the valley. Word of the blast which had shaked down the overhang, damming Black River, and what that would mean to Forbes, to Stapelton, and to the other ranchers on down-river.

Verity had heard the explosion—a sound like distant thunder which had caused her to pause for a moment, believing it at first to be a gun-shot, then the booming of cannon. Remembering it, she shivered. For the men affected by it had stood with Malcolm the night before against the weight of Wolf Track and Tillicum.

That had been bad enough. Worse had followed hard on its heels. The rumor that this thing had happened because Malcolm, a known traitor, had played the Judas again. They were saying that he had sold out to Buell Pearson, and that Pearson had acknowledged as much publicly.

Hearing it, Verity shivered. She did not believe it, but she saw that the rest of the town entertained no doubts. It fitted in with what they already believed of the black sheep of Black River, with what they liked to think of him.

So the rumors had filled the day with doubt. As night drew on, they studded it with nameless fears. And like the embodiment of them all, an hour past darkfall, came the cloaked stranger to her door.

Verity heard him knock—sharply, peremptorily. She hesitated for a moment, feeling terror rising in her, her hands raised, one above her thudding heart, the other reaching toward her throat where a frightened pulse beat. Then she reminded herself sternly that she was a daughter of a stout race, and that there was nothing to be afraid of. This was a civilized town, and this summons was made boldly and in the open. Likewise, hers was a public place of business. When the pulse beating in her throat had subsided a little, she opened the door.

He was a tall man, and appeared slender despite the long black coat, or cloak. And there was a suggestion of strength about him like that of a rapier. He was foreign, she knew instantly. No such rich and polished boots, despite the coating of fine dust, had ever trod the streets of Bald Butte before. His mustaches were pointed and arro-

gant, and the black eyes above were sharp as bullets, and somehow reminded her of bullets—leads looking out of brass shell cases, ready at a trigger-touch to be set off.

For a moment he stood eyeing her. Then, without permission, he stepped quickly inside, shouldering her back, and shut the door behind him. His glance traveled around the room, and came back to her face.

"You are sister to Case McClay?" he asked. And his English, while meticulous and careful, held the trace of a foreign accent.

"I am Verity McClay," Verity acknowledged, trying to fight down the fear which rose again in her. "But Case is not here. Did you wish to see him?"

"Pairhaps. Pairhaps not. It might be bettair, pairhaps, if I talk with you instead, for a little while. I am Philippe—*Monsieur* Philippe. You say that he is not here?"

"He was in town this morning. Probably he is at the ranch now—he works at the Fishhook, you know, Mr. Philippe. If you want to see him, that is the place to go."

Monsieur Philippe turned again for a survey of the room—he was more leisurely now, supremely arrogant. He crossed the door to the inner room, but found Verity facing him there, her eyes flashing, her slender little figure very straight and defiant.

"Mr. Philippe, these are my private quarters. This room is open to the public—but this room only!"

"I shall look at it," Philippe said coldly. He set his hand to her are—his fingers were like steel hooks—and twisted her aside so brutally that it almost drew a cry from her. Then, while she watched helplessly, nursing her bruised arm, he made a casual inspection of the two small rooms beyond. At last, apparently satisfied, he returned to the front room and helped himself to a chair.

"I hope you're satisfied!" Verity blazed at him. "Apparently you're a Frenchman—and I had understood that Frenchmen were gentlemen!"

Monsieur Philippe shrugged.

"It pays to see for oneself," he said. "As to being a gentleman or not—that is as it may be expedient. I assure you that I can be a gentleman—and am quite willing to be one if its profits me. But I can be otherwise—*quite* otherwise, if it becomes necessairy."

There was an unmistakable threat in his words. And he had not

bothered to lower his voice, though the window stood open, for the evening was warm. That penetrating voice could be heard from the street beyond by any passers-by. Verity felt little relief at the thought.

Monsieur Philippe's glance also strayed to the window, and his smile grew a little more sardonic, as if he were reading her thoughts. But he merely shrugged, and did not bother to moderate his tones.

"Let me warn you, I am not by nature a patient man. And there has been far too much of delay, of this and of that. Such patience as I had is long since exhausted. With the destiny of empires at stake, there can be no more delay permitted. I will not have it. Is that clear?"

Verity blinked. Was the man mad? He did not look it, but certainly he sounded so. The destiny of empires! Why come to her, unless he was mad? Her apprehension increased, but she controlled her voice.

"If you wish he to help you, you will have to be more explicit, I'm afraid. I understand your words, but not what you're talking about."

"Bah!" *Monsier* Philippe said inelegantly. "You think to, as you say it, pull the wool over my eyes, is that it? To make the fool of me? Because you are a woman, and pretty, to toy with me? It will not work. I have seen plenty of pretty women before. And you do not look like a fool."

Verity bit her lip.

"Thank you," she said.

"Bah! Will you persist in this game? You are his sister—you admit it. So we will have done with the foolishness. This has been a game for high stakes—we will admit that. I repeat, the destiny of empires is at stake. Your brother was of the South—of the Confederacy, as you call it. We believed that we could trust him, as an honorable major if not that, as one who put his own cause, his patriotism, above other things."

My brother is a Southerner, a Confederate," Verity flashed. "And he is an honorable man! Don't you dare suggest that he isn't!"

"Bah!" Philippe taunted her again. "I suggest the obvious. All men have their price—and there is much treasure involved when—must I repeat it?—empires hang upon the outcome! There can be no more delay. I will not have it."

"If you'd talk less and explain more, maybe I could tell what you were driving at," Verity said tartly.

"To the point then I will come. For months now, we have been put off with plausible-sounding excuses, but always excuses, not results. No longer are they plausible. I, Philippe, am not a fool. Would I represent His Gracious Majesty otherwise? And by him I am fully empowered. Time runs short. This Monroe Doctrine is again mouthed loudly; delay longer we dare not. So! I say that your brother has tried the double-cross! That he already has the treasure, and seeks to keep it for himself! It is a dangerous game which you two play, I warn you!"

Verity listened, bewildered. Treasure, on which the fate of empires depended! Monroe Doctrine! More and more he sounded to her like a madman, yet there was no madness in his eyes, only a calculating coldness. And certainly something strange had been going on in the Black River country for a long time—she had sensed it, had had evidence of it, even though she had not understood it. But this thing was monstrous.

And Case! What had he to do with it? He was only a cowboy—or was that all? *Monsieur* Philippe had spoken of some plan for the Confederacy, something involving patriotism. That would fit right in with Case's ideas. He was, she was certain, as much of an unrepentant rebel at heart as she herself. And while she had accepted the surrender, the defeat of her cherished cause, as realities, she had not changed her convictions. If a thing was right, right enough to fight and die for, defeat on the field of battle did not alter the justice of it, in her opinion.

"You talk as though I was involved in something, whatever it is, with my brother," she said slowly. "But I assure you that I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Bah!" It was explosive this time, loud enough to reach half-across the town. "I have told you that I am no fool—and that I am sure you are no fool! That traisure has been found! Who, then, has it, if not your brother, who is in charge of operations for its recovery? Why would he have you here, if not to assist him? All the answers are of the most obvious."

Dismay crept through her. From his standpoint, that seemed logical. And it was easy to see that this *monsieur* was a stubborn man, convinced that his own opinions were right, past any possibility of mistake.

"So now you will tell me—where is it? Tell me now, and I give you

my word, the word of Philippe, that it will be used as agreed upon, to further the great cause—the common cause. I will assume that there has been no intention of treachery, of the double-cross. All will be well. That I promise! Is it not enough?"

"I'm sure it would be, *M'sieu'*, only that I do not know anything at all about this, except what you have told me," Verity assured him.

His face grew suddenly ugly, and he came out of the chair, towering over her.

"Bah! Must I, be plainer? Must I be brutal? I assure you that I can be both—and willingly, for the cause! Do as I say, and honor will go to your brother, to yourself—honor and one day riches! But if I am trifled with any longer, I will know that he is a traitor, a thief. And I know how to deal with such! I warn you, I will have the information which I seek, and now! Which way is it to be?"

He towered above her, threat in every line of him. His hands, with those inordinately powerful fingers, were only inches from her throat. Verity fought back a feeling of faintness, a desire to scream. It seemed to her that this inquisition had been going on for hours.

Surely the raised, arrogant voice of Philippe must have been heard; others must know that something not at all right was going on there. Surely someone would come to her aid soon! This, however much it seemed like it, was not some remote part of the Old World, where kings and emperors held divine sway; nor was it a night transplanted out of the Middle Ages.

"You are completely mistaken, *M'sieu'* Philippe," she told him again, calling on all her dignity. "And now I must ask you to leave my house. I assure you that you are mistaken. I know nothing about any treasure. I doubt if Case does. And if I scream for help, what do you think will happen to you?"

"What do *you* think will happen to you?" Philippe taunted her. "As to the first, I assure you again that I am not mistaken. This afternoon, I visited the tunnel myself. The side shaft to the cavern—I saw that it had been opened, not long before, and a clumsy attempt made to close it up again. That, of course, could mean but one thing: the double-cross. And I do not deal lightly with traitors!"

His face was close to hers now, his eyes magnetic, compelling. It seemed to Verity that she could not scream, even if she wanted to.

"As for the rest—try and call, and my fingers will stop that! But what if you did shout? No one will come. They are cowards here,

poltroons. Bah! Even if they did try to help you, do you think that I am not prepared? One blast of the whistle, one call on this horn here, and it will bring help which is lurking close at hand—men with guns, with sabres! Enough to sweep all opposition aside!"

He was deadly in earnest, thoroughly confident. Verity could see that. His voice rose again.

"As I had long suspected, there at the cavern—nothing! But I will not have it so! Now you will tell me—or I shall choke it from you! This is your last chance! Where is the traisure? Is it worth more to you than your life?"

Chapter XIV

IN THE DARKNESS outside, Malcolm tensed. He had reached the shop without being discovered, slipped quietly along in the deeper shadow of which the canyon-walled town had such an abundance. And he had listened for a little while at the open window, with both amazement and understanding.

There was still plenty which was not clear to him. The part about the destiny of empires was as much a puzzle to him as it was to Verity. But certain things were clearing up. If the Beaver, Case McClay, was there, and engaged on some job which was so important that a bullet to stop Malcolm was deemed in order, then the thing was big, vitally important. He had been sure of that from the start. And the tunnel, involved as it was with the buried cavern, was plainly connected with it.

Now it was easy to understand that some treasure cache had been buried there—something probably brought back for temporary hiding and safekeeping before the war ended. Which meant that it had had to do with the struggle between the states. And now his mind clicked suddenly, as though a new leaf had been turned in the story.

As a secret service operative, he had gotten certain knowledge which was not known to many, certainly not to the general public. He knew that there had been at one time a veritable treasure horde, gathered by agents of the hard-pressed federal government from various secret sources. It had consisted of gold, diamonds, pearls—imperishable money which did not require too large a container.

That wealth had come to the United States from a foreign shore, arriving secretly in the West. It had started on a supposedly secret journey overland, back to Washington. Officials had been counting heavily on using that wealth to turn the tide of battle, when victory or defeat had hung precariously in the balance.

Most people had never heard of the money. But somewhere along the way East it had disappeared. True, a box had arrived in Washington, which when opened was found to contain stones and scrap iron, and to be a duplicate of the original.

There has followed weeks of consternation in official circles, which had feared that the vitally necessary treasurer had fallen into the hands of Confederate agents. If that was the case, and they used it to bolster their own badly disorganized finances, it could easily turn the tide the other way.

But nothing had happened. The war had dragged on to a final weary conclusion, and the North had won. So far as Malcolm was aware, that lost treasure horde had never turned up. Certainly it had not been recovered by its rightful owners, the Government of the United States. Nor, apparently, had the Confederacy and the few bold spirits connected with that enterprise ever profited by it.

Its disposition had remained a deep mystery. Here, he felt suddenly, was the explanation. Confederate agents had succeeded in stealing the strong-box right out from under the noses of those sent to safeguard it to Washington. Hard pressed, they had hidden it temporarily in the big cavern in the Black River country—on Black River Ranch.

And then, not content with the jig-saw already created by striving men, fate had laughed and taken a hand. The overhang of the mountain had slid—burying the cavern, and with it the treasure!

His pulse quickened with excitement. There could be little doubt of it. It was that lost treasure which was at stake now. Case—the Beaver's—connection with it—the plan, somehow to help the lost cause of the Confederacy—these were involved, though there was much more as well. That would account for the secrecy in the tunneling, explain why they had not driven straight in through the slide. For if the secret became known, the government would be vitally interested!

Malcolm, returning to his old home, seeking only peace and a chance to rest, had inadvertently stumbled into the middle of this feverish new quest to get hold of the treasure again, as the hunt neared its climax! It was only natural that the Beaver, seeing him riding there, recognizing him as his old enemy, should assume that he was there again as a Federal operative—probably with knowledge of what was going on—and act accordingly.

All of that was clear enough. It also seemed pretty plain that, up to now, these men had succeeded in moving quietly enough, in this remote country, to avoid arousing the suspicion of the government. Evidently Buell Pearson, with an avid nose for the scent of money,

had gotten wind of what was going on, and was taking a hand in the game, but with the thought only of serving himself.

Which meant, Malcolm thought grimly, that *he alone was there to protect the interests of the United States Government!*

As to the other details—just who *Monsieur* Philippe might represent, or any of the rest, Malcolm could only guess. But he had heard enough to realize the desperate urgency of the situation. It was easy to understand why Buell Pearson was intervening, to keep any of the already frightened townspeople from interfering. He had made a shrewd guess as to *Monsieur* Philippe's purpose and, spurned by Verity, he was perfectly willing now to see her suffer any sort of indignity if it would bring to light the secret of the treasure—so that he could get his hands on it!

Compared to this, the turning of Black River, the land on downstream, were small pickings indeed, but not too small for Pearson, if he could work it. Particularly when that served as an effective smoke-screen for the larger operation, cloaking his own interest from Case McClay, from Philippe and the others involved.

Not, Malcolm guessed, that Case had been fooled. Case was shrewd. But Philippe had made a mistake here. It was Malcolm's conviction that the treasure had not yet been recovered. And in any case, he was certain that Case had never breathed a word of his purpose to his sister.

"For the last time, I give you a chance," Philippe was saying. "Do you tell me now—or must I choke it from you?"

As Philippe's fingers reached for her throat, Malcolm moved fast. The window was handy. He wished now that he had taken time to get himself a gun, but he had not anticipated trouble tonight, had been thinking only of bed.

Monsieur Philippe, he observed, carried a small, bugle-like horn slung in a strap at his side. Apparently he had meant that one blast from it would bring his own crew swarming in.

The horn could serve another purpose now. Philippe's back was turned to him, and Malcolm's fingers closed on the horn, had it loose with a jerk. A quick swing, and he brought it down hard on Philippe's skull—to the everlasting ruin of the instrument, which had not been designed for such a purpose.

Though he was tougher than the horn, there were limits even to *Monsieur* Philippe's thickheadedness. He stumbled and went down, a

strange look of blankness and incomprehension spreading across his face. One glance at him assured Malcolm that he was out cold, and would stay so for some time to come.

Then, like an echo to the dull thud of the blow, a whistle shrilled from somewhere outside—loud and sharp across the night. Startled, Malcolm realized that Philippe, being shrewd, must have posted a confederate where he could keep watch. Malcolm's own movements had been too fast for him to interfere, but now it was he who had sounded the whistle which would bring help.

And that help was not going to be long in coming. It seemed, in the next few moments, that *Monsieur* Philippe had not exaggerated. Before the shrill echo of the whistle had died away, there came a pounding of hoofs like a cavalry regiment on the charge. There was no doubt that Philippe had posted a considerable force of men just at the outskirts of the town, ready to sweep in. They would be there in a matter of moments.

"Quick," Malcolm gasped, and grabbed the hand of Verity, who stood a little dazed by the speed of events. "We've got to get away!"

Neither the front door, nor the window through which he had entered, would do now. The man who had sounded the whistle was outside, and Malcolm knew with certainty that he would shoot to kill. A sweep of his arm sent the lamp chimney crashing to the floor; a quick puff of his breath plunged the room into darkness. And not an instant too soon. Again like an echo, but just a thought belatedly, a gun stabbed flame into the outer night, and the bullet made a shrill sing-song before thudding into the wall.

Not waiting for more, Malcolm led the way to the rear, Verity beside him. He was thankful now for his knowledge of the house, gained that morning.

It was possible that there would be other guards posted out behind, but that was a chance which they had to take. Then, as they reached the door, Verity spoke.

"Wait just a moment, Monty. Here!"

She had darted away, was back again and thrusting a gun into his hand, all in a space of seconds. No question but that she was sister to Case McClay, to note that he was weaponless, and to move so swiftly.

He opened the door and stepped quickly through, thankful for the darkness, ready for anything. Verity was close at his heels. Nothing

happened. But by now there was a wild tumult in the town. Riders were sweeping in, coming like a wave—a grimly silent bunch of men, with the outward appearance of cowboys, but completely ruthless. Malcolm saw a running figure on foot—saw a man lean from the saddle and strike with a chopping motion, using his gun-barrel, mowing the fugitive down with as cold a dispassion as though he were swatting a mosquito.

Malcolm picked a way, slipping like a shadow among the converging figures, until like shadows they were through that closing line. In the gloom were a couple of tethered horses, left standing by cowboys. Someone would go afoot tonight, but it would not be himself or Verity.

Presently they were out of town. Behind them rang out two or three scattered shots, sharp and harsh. More confusion. Then the fresh pounding of hoofs as the horsemen swept out in pursuit. Now, he knew, the hunt was on—made doubly relentless by the discovery of their leader, who was by now probably sufficiently recovered from his headache to have a thirst for vengeance.

Chapter XV

SOON THERE would be enough moon to make the night cousin to the day—something to be welcomed under ordinary circumstances when a man took a ride with as pretty a woman as Verity. But it was not a pleasant prospect while they were being hunted. yet the soft radiance of the moon's light was beyond the horizon like a promise, and the stars high above them had a friendly look.

They were heading toward Black River Ranch, partly because there was good shelter there, partly because Malcolm was impatient to return there himself.

Yet there was confusion in that course. Case McClay was against him, and Verity loved her brother. Like him, she was Southern, in spirit and in belief, still a rebel at heart. Which would probably mean that she would hate Malcolm for his part in this, once she understood.

She had accepted him so warmly, because she believed that he was what he was not. That was the aspect of the situation which he hated. Yet he had to go on, driven by the same spur which goaded Case—duty.

"I can't understand what this is all about," Verity protested, breaking the silence. "He didn't seem to be crazy, exactly, but he certainly talked wild. What would he mean, for instance, by the destiny of empires?"

Malcolm shook his head.

"It's got me puzzled, too," he confessed. And then he was brought up mentally by a sudden notion, so unexpected that it startled him. It seemed far-fetched—yet so was the whole business. And he had long since discovered in his work that the improbable was more often than not to be expected. Life was that way, particularly when men took a hand in twisting the strings of destiny.

And this could be—in fact, the more he considered it, the more it seemed the logical conclusion. But he said nothing of his new hunch. For one thing, there was no more chance to talk.

Distant shouts from behind, the faint clatter of hoofs, testified

that they had been seen, and now the chase was on in earnest. The only thing to do was to confuse their pursuers, to lose them if possible. Malcolm swerved off across country, into the hills and brush, cursing the climbing moon which now thwarted their every effort. For himself, he did not care too much. But Verity was in danger, and must not be taken.

The next hour was one of continuous setbacks. Despite every ruse he knew, they had not succeeded in losing the pursuit. Instead the hunt had narrowed. There were a lot of riders abroad tonight, all of them apparently engaged in the job of trying to run them down. Forced to cross occasional open spaces flooded by the moon, they had been seen. Now, he knew grimly, they had finally been surrounded. It was a fairly large circle still, but narrowing; their pursuers were closing in on them like Indians riding in a ring about a wagon train.

Black River and the cavern were still three or four miles away. This was broken country, with some trees and brush, which favored them. But now it was necessary to leave their horses, to skulk ahead on foot. That way, they might be able to slip through the closing lines.

"I'm right sorry about this, Verity," Malcolm told her, "makin' you walk, and all. Sure thought I could do a better job of givin' 'em the slip."

"I like to walk. And you've done as well as anybody could have," Verity protested. "I'm not forgetting how you showed up to help me, just when I needed you worst."

They were whispering, but now small sounds indicated that it was no longer safe even to whisper. The others, closing in, had shown more competence at this sort of a chase than Malcolm relished. They, too, had left their horses so as to go more quietly on foot. And they did not talk, so as not to betray their positions. At least not more than an occasional muttered word.

He had caught a few words, which served only to confirm his new hunch about this business. *Monsieur* Philippe was French, there was no doubt of that. And a while before, which the circle was wider, Malcolm had heard his voice giving orders, cold and precise and ruthless, speaking in his careful English.

"Just one thing, remember. We want them alive! Particularly the girl!"

But most of the mutterings were in another tongue—Spanish, he

guessed it to be. Here were Spaniards and Frenchmen, involved in intrigue, in that free land of the West. It was a land where, in the not too distant past, both French and Spanish flags had waved, both nations had claimed sovereignty.

Malcolm and Verity moved again, stealthily, following a line of brush, as the searchers approached the clump where they had crouched. Here was more brush, but not big nor thick enough to afford good concealment. But if his memory served him right, there were more trees and brush not far ahead, which were dense enough to afford them a good chance—if they could get there.

They moved again, following a small gully, rounding a knoll. They had not been seen, and Malcolm let out his breath in a slow sigh. Ahead, as he had remembered it, there had been a dense growth—poplar and fir, with service-berry and thorn apple and rose briars around the edges. But that belonged, he saw now, to the past. It was there no longer.

Instead there was rank new growth only a foot or so in height, mute testimony that fire had burned across there. And now, with the ring of searchers still closing relentlessly, there was nowhere else to go, save across the open ground. And with the moon high overhead, that would mean sure discovery.

Malcolm gripped his gun uncertainly. If he had been alone he would have chanced making a run for it. It would be risky in any case, almost hopeless now. Yet to remain was as bad. He could put up a fight, but against such odds, the outcome was certani and hopeless.

He saw that Verity understood it, too, but she gave him a quick smile, apparently not at all daunted by the prospect.

"You take the gun," Malcolm decided. "Stay here. I'll made a run for it, and while they're after me, you slip away."

She shook her head promptly.

"We're in this together," she said.

Now he could hear the rustle of men seeking to move cautiously, see a shadow outlined. And then there came an unlooked for interruption: a sharp sound on the night, not very far away—the quick double staccato of gun-shots.

Two shots, then silence, while everyone seemed to hold his breath and the echoes whispered away across the hills like a sigh. The silence following those shots was like a weight. Someone spoke

nervously, though still in guarded tones. Another man answered from not far at the side. Then, again, the hunters began their advance.

Hope, after flaring high in Malcolm for an instant, faded again. He had thought that here might be help. For Case McClay, never one to stay idle for long, and always well informed as to what was going on, should know by this time what the hunt was about. And Case would be concerned, since his sister was involved.

Case, of course, had been denounced by Philippe as a traitor and a double-crosser. But this would not impress Case nor sway him in the least.

And then, as if to prove that his guess was right, Case's voice come sharply from not far away. And Case himself stepped out from a patch of brush, full into the moonlight.

"Listen," he said, and he was a commanding figure as he stood there, outlined for any hostile gun which might center on him—knowing well, of course, that he was surrounded by hostile guns.

"Listen, men," he repeated. "You heard those shots just now! Well, one of them was fired by *Monsieur* Philippe—an error of judgment on his part, one of many. I hate to be shot at. So I, too, fired one shot, and I do not make such errors. That is why I am here, alive, to tell you that he was a fool, and why, being a fool, he is dead!"

He waited a moment, while a slow and uneasy stirring started in the hidden circle. Verity's hand was on Malcolm's arm, her fingers tense.

"I have killed Philippe," Case went on. "He was like his master, a fool, and so in danger of spoiling everything. This is much too big, too important, to be ruined by bunglers. Understand me, now. *I* am in command—and it is from me that you will now take your orders!"

This was like flaunting a red flag before the eyes of a bull. It drew an immediate and angry retort.

"W'at you say? Our master, a fool? Dat ees wan beeg lie—"

"That's what I said," Case returned contemptuously. "If he wasn't, he wouldn't be in the fix he's in—nor would he pick such fools as Philippe to carry out such a job as this for him. The sort of methods that *monsieur* used might go pretty well back in the old country, but they don't go here! But don't get excited. His being

a fool makes no difference to me. We're all working for the same thing, and so far as Philippe was concerned, it was his life or mine. That's the only reason I killed him. We're all interested in the same thing—getting hold of that money, so that the emperor can use it. Once we get it, I'll see that he gets it, according to agreement."

There was still an uneasy silence, while the others digested this. Case went on.

"*Monsieur* Philippe, I tell you, was a bungler, jumping to conclusions, because he didn't know any better. Saying that we'd entered the cave, and that I had the treasure. It's true, as some of you know, that we've gotten to the cavern—but that's all. We haven't had a chance to search it yet. Too many other things—like Philippe—have interfered.

"So that's the next job—the important one. If you want to serve the emperor, then you'll do as I say. You all know how I've worked at this, and why I've done it. Now, do you take my orders or not? That's the only chance for success."

Again, after a moment of silence, someone spoke up in agreement.

"That is sense, *oui!* We will do as you say!"

Others chimed in, agreeing. Two or three men stepped out into the open and began to approach.

"With luck," Case said grimly, "we'll have that stuff by daylight, and before the day's over, it should be on its way to Maximilian!"

Chapter XVI

"MAXIMILIAN!" IT WAS a faltering cry, torn from the lips of Verity. "Oh, Case, not that!"

She had watched breathlessly, pride shining in her eyes, as Case had asserted his leadership and brought these hostile men under his sway. Then she had started suddenly to her feet, had begun running toward him.

She stopped at the name of the Emperor of Mexico, something like horror in her eyes as understanding came to her. But Case had stepped quickly forward, apparently paying no attention to her reproach, and put an arm about her shoulders.

"So you were here, Verity," he said gently. "I figured you'd be somewhere right close. Well, you don't need to worry any now." His teeth clicked. "I'm glad I did kill that Philippe!"

Malcolm heard no more. His own wild guess, he knew now, was only too true. And it was a magnificent plot, as such things went, arrogant in its boldness, world-shaking in scope.

That treasure horde, stolen from the United States before they could use it against the Confederacy, and in turn, wrested from the South by that freak of nature which had caused the slide to cover the cavern, was still to be used for the cause. Certainly it was not the cause of independence which Case McClay had first envisioned and fought for, but quite the contrary. Yet Case, his mind warped and twisted by the hate engendered by war, fanatically clinging to a lost cause, had not been quite able to differentiate between evil and what he so ardently believed to be good.

Malcolm knew the history of Mexico during these latter turbulent years. Torn by internal strife, it had been an easy prey for ambitious, unscrupulous men. Napoleon III of France, with as boundless an ambition for world domination as his equally ruthless but far more capable namesake, had taken advantage of the civil strife in the United States to install a puppet emperor of his own in Mexico —the Austrian Archduke, Maximilian. And that in defiance both of the wishes of the people of Mexico and of the Monroe Doctrine.

For a few short and unhappy years, Maximilian had clung to that throne, hated by the people he tried to rule, doing a tightrope act which daily grew more difficult. With the end of the Civil War, his position had become hopeless.

The Mexicans were ready, with slight encouragement and very little help, to rise and turn him out. And with the United States free once again to turn its attention to affairs next door, possessing a large and well-trained army, Napoleon had been quick to see that this part of his dream, at least, was hopeless. So he no longer was prepared to give any aid to his puppet, and left the unhappy Maximilian to stand or fall on his own resources.

Hopelessly insufficient as these were, Maximilian still clung to his precarious throne. And now the scheme was clear to Malcolm. If the treasure horde, once destined for the coffers of the Confederacy, could be recovered in time and turned over to Maximilian, it could be used to strengthen his position enormously. Gold, in the

proper places and at the right time, can uphold or destroy empires.

With that wealth, Maximilian hoped to make a real fight of it, perhaps to improve his position sufficiently so that the ever-hopeful Napoleon, who had first sponsored him, would risk coming to his aid again. If a new war could be gotten under way, a bitter fight to the finish in which the United States was involved—then, as Case McClay and some of his hot-headed friends envisioned it—the South might rise again too.

There was still a great army of trained and resentful veterans, men who had of course not taken kindly to the notion of surrender. Here was a chance to snatch victory from defeat. Or so it seemed to Case, who did not stop to think of the immensely destructive forces which he was seeking to set in motion, or to consider that those forces were inherently hostile, not alone to the United States, but to the Southern states as well!

Thinking of only one thing, he was going ahead with this scheme! And it might work! Probably not to the extent which Case anticipated, but enough, if this wealth once fell into the hands of Maximilian, to set bloody war flaming across the land again, in a struggle which could bring only added hardship and disaster to all.

This, then, was the real plot. And, sensing it, Buell Pearson had been lurking on the fringes like a jackal, seeking to snatch the treasure for himself.

Now that Verity was safe with her brother, Malcolm was losing no time. The others were too preoccupied with what was going on to give further thought to him, at least for the moment. Taking full advantage of the chance, Malcolm slipped away through the screen of brush, doubled, and was beyond them.

He was thankful to Case for one thing—his timely arrival on the scene. But the larger struggle between Case and himself must go on, precisely as Case himself had foreseen. It was up to him to get to that treasure before the others could reach it.

Presently he found a horse which one of the other men had ridden, and appropriated it for himself. A couple of miles farther on he left it, out of sight in a clump of trees, and again went on foot.

The moonlight, not so bright now, still showed the old, dilapidated buildings of Black River Ranch crouched there at the foot of the mountain. Under the moon, and with a coyote howling from somewhere high on the hill, their air of desertion was more pronounced

than ever, but Malcolm was taking no chances. There might be others around there, and he was wary. But he dared not waste much time in extra caution. Time was vital now.

His weariness of earlier in the day was forgotten in the stimulus of excitement. His body was inured to hardship, and he could keep going, when necessity demanded, for a long time. Now, if ever, was the time.

He had more than half expected to find some of the crew of Tillicum thereabouts, but apparently Pearson had not learned of some of these more recent developments. Malcolm reached the mouth of the tunnel without challenge. He found a lantern inside, and lit it. There were more matches there, left behind by someone—a small tight metal box of them, which he put into a pocket against future need. These new matches were a mighly handy invention.

Deep inside the mountain, as he climbed the now somewhat familiar path, things seemed just as they had been before. He went ahead, noting with new and grim interest several added crosses which he had failed to observe previously. It had been a costly job, digging the passage; men's lives had meant little.

Not far ahead was the cross-shaft which he knew led to the cavern itself, and which, judging both by what he had learned, and also by a louder roaring sound of the pent up waters of Black River, must really have been opened all the way to the cavern since he had last been there. He could see the side-tunnel just ahead when he heard the sound of voices. They came from somewhere up above.

For a moment he listened. The curve of the tunnel ahead prevented him from seeing any gleam of light from up there, just as it would hide his own, for a little while. But the noises were coming closer, proof that others were descending from above, and would soon be at his level. Their objective, he had no doubt, was the same as his own.

Malcolm pondered, irritated. If he had only been given a little more time—but such time was not to be given. Under some conditions, he would have been willing to keep in the background and allow others to search, keeping an eye on them to discover what they might find. But the rub here was that there was no place where he might hide and still watch them.

If he wanted time, he'd have to buy it. Moving fast, he hurried on, past the side-shaft, on up the old tunnel. Those who were coming

down were still a long way up, for sound carried far. That was a lucky break.

Maybe an old, white-whiskered trick would work here, at least long enough to delay them. He had found a cord back where the other supplies were kept and had thrust it into a pocket, figuring that it might come in handy. Now, at a point where the path descended a bit more steeply, he tied it across two braces set tautly a few inches above the ground.

Blowing out his own lantern, he retraced his steps. Now, far up above, he could see the dim reflected gleam of the other lantern coming closer. Then there was a yell, a curse, and the light went out abruptly, with a smash of breaking glass.

Malcolm grinned. His little ruse had worked. Stumbling across the cord, whoever had carried the lantern had fallen headlong, and now was left in the pitchy blackness of the tunnel. It would take some time to get a new light, and that would delay them.

But not for very long. Relighting his own lantern, Malcolm paused at the entrance to the side-shaft. Here were stored various other supplies. His glance brightened at sight of them.

Dynamite. And cap and fuse. Here was luck.

Moving swiftly, he went up the tunnel again. Someone shouted, apparently having seen his light. But it would take him a while to get there. And right at hand was a good place—he had noticed it only a few minutes before. A place where the diggers had dug around a big stone overhead, then, fearful that it might fall, had braced it, but not too well.

There was a little hole, or pocket, beneath it, just the right size to tuck his charge of explosive in. He sliced the fuse short, lit it, and retreated. He was hardly back to the side-shaft when it went off with an earth-jarring roar.

Where he stood, nothing happened. But he knew that the tunnel up above would be a ruin now, choked and impassable. Most of the fumes from the blast would rise upward. Such as were trapped would not seep back down to him, at least not soon enough to be dangerous. Of course, with the ventilation cut off, within a few days the air would certainly get bad. But for the present it gave him his chance.

There was evidence in the side-shaft of hasty digging since he had first been there. The last barrier to the cavern, only a couple of feet of dirt as it happened, had been broken through. Now the roar of the

waters was loud and continuous. There was, likewise, a colder, damper feel to the air here, like what he remembered in the cavern in the old days.

They had not bothered to remove the newly dug dirt. It was scattered on the floor, so that there was hardly room to get through into the cavern. Then it opened up, a vast void of midnight, full of the shouting fury of sound, in which the light of his lantern was a feeble thing, and the glint of it, catching the leashed might of the waters, seemed to shine on an obsidian stream. Like the River Styx, Malcolm thought—and about as unpleasant, there in the deep recesses of the earth.

Chapter XVII

FOR A MOMENT, Malcolm stood still, feeling some of the same awe which had struck him when first he had climbed the hill to the cavern and had seen the fury of the trapped river. Now he moved ahead, holding the lantern high, trying to get an adequate look about.

It was not easy, in such a huge place and with such a feeble glow. Even in the old days before the slide, with daylight flooding in the mouth of the cavern, it had seemed a dark, remote and fearsome place. Now the aspect of it was accentuated.

He could see how the slide had changed things. A lot of dirt had poured back inside while the cave mouth was in the process of being covered; tons upon tons of it, rising up now in a sort of mountain. Some of the rocks and dirt reached almost to the water's edge.

For a moment, sharp doubt assailed him. Even if that box of treasure had been hidden in here, it might easily be buried so deep that it could never be found. But a second thought was reassuring. The others, who had first entered the cavern to hide it, must have considered that.

They would have been able to judge with fair accuracy how far back the dirt, crowding in, would reach, and it had evidently been their opinion that the box had been placed at some spot where it would still be likely to rest in safety. There were plenty of such untouched recesses of the cavern, as was easy to see. Otherwise, they

would never have gone to all that work, despite the huge stakes for which they were gambling.

Some other things were now also easier to figure out. *Monsieur* Philippe had been French, probably sent by Napoleon to assist and perhaps to help keep an eye on Maximilian. Those who had spoken in Spanish were Mexicans, of course, and it was only natural that the emperor should have at least a slight following among the people —self-seekers who figured that they could better their fortunes with him more easily than with a native government.

And probably a lot of Mexicans—perhaps sent here as virtual slaves—had been imported for some of the toilsome digging.

Now he could see the majestic beginning of Black River, as it gushed wildly out of what seemed a wall of solid rock. It poured down into the cavern below, a black turmoil of water, shouting wildly in freedom, scarcely starting to taste it before it was forced again into imprisoning walls, that next hole in solid rock. It entered the new channel in wild protest, just as Malcolm had remembered.

He moved along the edge of the rocky bank, six or eight feet above the turgid flood—where a misstep would send a man hurtling straight down to his doom. Once in that current, even a strong swimmer could not fight his way against it before being swept on into the black tunnel where the stream vanished again. There was a space of five or six feet above the water, but it was black and forbidding.

For a moment he speculated on that thought. If a man were to go into that tunnel where the river disappeared, would he have any chance of coming out alive?

But that was unprofitable speculation, and not of much interest. Usually he wasn't so morbid as to think about such things. It was this River Styx atmosphere which was affecting him, he guessed. The thing now was to make use of the time which was at his disposal. He would have need of all of it.

Here was a log, a dozen feet in length and well over three feet thick. Another similar one was a little smaller. They had been parts of trees, broken off by the slide as it plunged down the mountain, flung back in there like match-sticks. There was a lot of debris to clamber over, including small stones and larger ones, some the size of boulders, and lots of dirt. All of which made for extra work before it was possible to look around.

Even a few minutes' search was discouraging. If that box had been set on the bare floor of the cavern and left there, it apparently was not there now—unless it was somewhere underneath that vast pile of dirt.

That, of course, seemed an unlikely place to leave it. But if it had been put somewhere else—in a crack in the rock at the side, for instance—then something must have happened to it in the cataclysm which had come with the slide. He could see no place now where it might have been—or where it was.

Maybe that was a good thing. If there was no treasure to be found, all of this plotting would come to nothing.

But he was not satisfied with so obvious a solution. It might still be around, and it was up to him to see that it did not fall into the wrong hands, until the fact that it was not there was definitely established. And something in him rebelled at the notion of such an easy out.

Men had toiled and died for that wealth. Some would call it bloodstained on that account—and perhaps it was. But originally it had belonged to the United States Government, and still did, so far as the legal aspects of the case were concerned. It would be far more satisfying, at the conclusion of such a mission, to find it and return it to its owners. And certainly it would be useful in reconstruction.

Moreover, if it was found, it would clear his record—clear him before the world. He caught his breath a little wistfully at the thought. Seldom had he even dared indulge in such a hope. But it would be pleasant, for a change, to receive his rightful due from his fellow-men, instead of their scorn and hatred.

Then his heart fell. He had been hoping this, he realized, mostly on account of Verity. But if he did get that treasure away from Case, and return it to the government, then Verity would hate him. Probably she would in any case, once she learned the truth about him.

And if thinking about her had conjured her up, he heard her voice.

It came from back in the tunnel, from the sideshaft which led into the cavern. And he realized instantly that she must be close for him to hear her voice at all above the noise of the water.

Swiftly, acting on instinct, he blew out his lantern. He was standing away from the mouth of the shaft, and so apparently those who were coming had not noticed his light.

It was Case who answered. They had, of course, come up from below, and there would be several others with them. Which meant that he was trapped. Pretty soon they would find him, since there was no good place to hide.

"Lawsy, Case, but that looks black and uninvitin'," Verity exclaimed as the light glowed brighter. "I'm not at all sure I want to go in there."

"Can't say that I blame you," Case agreed. "Why don't you go back down to the old house and wait there? This is no place for foolin' around in, if you don't have to."

"Guess I will," Verity agreed. "I don't think I'd make a good gopher." Then she added something which sounded a little strange to Malcolm's ears.

"But I hope you won't find it, Case. I never guessed what you were up to—sidin' with a foreign government. And I don't like it. The war's over. We lost—whether we like it or not, and I didn't. But it's not worth what it would cost, in blood and suffering, to start a new war over again. Not worth it at all."

Case sounded shocked.

"Sho' now, you don't really mean that, Verity. I thought you were as good a Southerner as they came. But you don't sound that way. Maybe it ain't a good thing to be livin' up here in Yankee country—"

"I'm as good a Southerner as ever I was, Case," Verity protested indignantly. "But the war's over—and I'm halfway on the side of Mr. Lincoln, after seeing how big a country it is, and how fine, all in one. Anyway, the war's over—and it is still our country. We're being treated as citizens, not as traitors, so we ought to act as citizens. I sure wouldn't favor perpetuatin' an empire right at our doorstep—and it being the tool of a bigger one that would like to enslave us if it got the chance. When it comes to something like that, Case, it's time to think as an American—not just as a Southerner."

There followed a long, rather strained moment of silence. Verity spoke again.

"That's the way I feel about it, Case. But we won't argue. I suppose you'll do your duty as you see it—and I reckon that's what a man has to do. I wonder where Mr. Malcolm went."

Case's voice sounded tight. It was evident that there was rankling bitterness in him now.

"Seein' how you've turned your coat, you'll be tickled, likely, to

know that he's been fightin' me, tooth an' nail, in this—an' still is. If he gets his hands on it, that won't do the emperor any good."

"What do you mean, Case?" There was amazement in Verity's voice now. "He—if he's a Southern spy—"

"He ain't," Case said shortly. "He never was. He's a Yankee spy—and we've battled each other for years. As to where he went, there's no tellin'. But now get along back to the house, and I'll be along before long. We won't quarrel over this, whatever happens. Tom, you and Jose go with her, and see that nothing happens to her."

There was no reply. Apparently Verity was too shocked and confused by these revelations to find any relief in words. Her own attitude was as much of a surprise to Malcolm as it had been to Case, but he at least approved of it. Not, he reflected, wryly, that he was likely to have any chance to tell her so.

Presently, after another confused murmur of several voices which Malcolm could not understand, a light advanced into the cavern, and he saw Case, holding the lantern high. Half a dozen other men were with him, with two more lanterns. One of them was unmistakably the Old Man of the Mountain—a good-natured giant of a man, at least seven feet in height, and big in proportion. He had the soft, liquid eyes of a native Mexican, and a plaintive voice like a child's.

For a few moments they stood, awed by the sight which met their eyes. Then Case spoke briskly.

"Well, boys, this is it," he said: "the place we've been tryin' to get for a long while now. So we'd better have a look around while we have the chance."

"What do you mean, while we have the chance?" one man demanded. He was a swaggering sort, with guns in twin holsters. "Ain't we got things our way now?"

Case looked at him a little pityingly .

"Right now, yeah—but are you so dumb as to be forgettin' Pearson, not to mention Monty Malcolm? Pearson won't aim to let us get away with anything—not without a fight. I'd feel a lot easier if I could get that box, and get out of here while we have a chance."

That was a forceful argument, and they prepared to have a look around. This, Malcolm knew, was it. Now the beam of light caught him, and one of the men gave a startled ejaculation. Instantly, two or three guns were trained on him.

Case swung about, showing no sign of surprise as he saw who it was. His face was sober.

"So you're here already, Monty," he said quietly. "Find anything?"

Malcolm shook his head.

"Not a thing, Case. It's my opinion that you've had your work for nothing."

"Could be," Case agreed. "But I don't think so. We'll find it."

Something in the quiet confidence of the man was impressive. Apparently he had information concerning the treasure which made him sure of himself. And that same certainty, Malcolm knew, made them as deadly enemies now as they had ever been at any point in their careers.

Case might be shocked by his sister's attitude, but he was not swayed by it. He had undertaken a job, and he had given his word to carry it through. Nothing would change that.

Malcolm retreated a few slow steps, while Case slowly advanced. Case's gun was trained on him, as were those of most of his crew. Now, with the sharp drop-off of the bank just ahead, where a single backward step would send him hurtling into the dark waters of the river, Malcolm, having no choice, stopped.

Case also ceased his advance. For a moment there was the old whimsical look on his face, a manifest regret at the workings of destiny.

"Blast it, Monty," he sighed. "I'm a fool for fair. If I'd just gone away, before, and left you alone—" He shook his head, leaving the sentence unfinished. "I knew then I was makin' a plumb idiot of myself, interferin'. For a job like this, between you and me—well, we've known all along, it had to end just one way. And it looks like the luck's with me this time."

Malcolm did not pretend to misunderstand. They had always played for big stakes. The stakes were still ahead, or so Case believed. Success or failure here could hinge on Malcolm, and he knew it. And there was always that word duty.

"I don't like it—don't like it a bit," Case went on, and a trace of genuine regret crept into his voice. "If you'd just stayed away from here a little spell longer, Monty—I sure as blazes wish you had. I'm not forgettin' what you did for Verity."

He shook his head, the regret still in his eyes; and behind it, a purpose as stern and inflexible as had driven him through the years.

"Take a look at that log, Monty," he added; "down there near the end. You'll see what I mean."

Malcolm looked, and his eyes widened understandingly. Evidently he had been wrong in his first assumption that the log had been carried in there by the slide. It pre-dated that. And it was, in part, a hollow log.

Down near the bottom, shadowed so that he had failed to notice it before, he could see a bit of an opening, and the gleam of metal upon which the lantern light reflected. The treasure chest, beyond any doubt—stuffed inside the log and thus skilfully hidden. There was triumph as well as regret in Case's voice now.

"That's why, Monty. And the stakes are too big, a lot too big, for even a man's life, such as your'n, to be allowed to count. I'm glad I don't have to do it myself—but it has to be done. All right, boys—get at it!"

Chapter XVIII

CASE WAS SLIDING his own gun back in leather as he spoke. But not his crew. Malcolm knew what that meant. He sensed as well the quivering eagerness of the gunmen, like hounds held in leash. Fingers were already starting to squeeze shut on triggers.

Well, Malcolm reflected, he'd wondered about that underground river. Here was a chance to find out!

Also, there was one thing which Case had not figured on—a highly important factor. In it lay the chance to snatch victory away from Case, to win his own fight, in the large sense, even in his moment of defeat.

Malcolm stepped back, going down even as the guns started to snarl. He was a fraction ahead of them. He threw out an arm, closing it around the log balanced there at the edge of the bank, toppling it, so that they hit the water together.

Whatever happened now, one thing was sure—Maximilian of Mexico would not bolster his tottering throne with the wealth hidden in that hollow log. It was a chest full of treasure, and the log was buoyant. It bobbed like a cork, and then the darkness sucked them

in, the last faint yellow glow of the lanterns was lost in a blackness so thick that even the interior of the mountain seemed light by comparison.

Malcolm clung doggedly, and most of the time he was out of the water. The speed was dizzy, but the channel seemed reasonably straight and clear. Then there came a change—a roaring on down ahead, as though the river smashed itself against a rocky wall. If that happened—

But abruptly now the water seemed to be dropping out from under him, and he knew that he had been cast up on some sort of a beach. Instinctively he scrambled forward on hands and knees, until he felt hard rock beneath him. A few more feet, and it was dry stone, very smooth, as though long polished by the waters. And, surprisingly, there were sticks—dry sticks.

He was still alive, and unhurt. But this was a river of no return. A fit of shivering took him, not all from the cold. But the wood, and there seemed to be a lot of it, was a solution. The match-box which he had found back in the tunnel was still in his pocket.

With fingers that trembled a little, he got it open. Racking together a small bunch of dry sticks, he struck a match against the stone underneath.

The match flared, a tiny blob of fire in that infinite pool of blackness. The relief of it made him sigh, and he feverishly piled on more wood.

There was plenty of wood, as the light revealed. Probably trees caught by the landslide, shoved into the cavern, and on into the river. The black tide of it flowed close at hand; the roar from the gloom beyond was deafening.

Here was something else of interest which had been cast up. A half of the log to which he had clung—split cleanly as if by the stroke of an axe. Hollow for a part of the way to begin with, it had apparently hit some obstruction with such terrific force as to crack it in two.

Malcolm shivered, eyeing it. Luck had been with him. If he had still been holding fast to it when it struck—

The chest was gone, of course—a plaything of the river now. Like himself.

As the grateful heat soaked into his bones, weariness overcame him. Malcolm nodded, caught himself, nodded again and slept.

Chapter XIX

MALCOLM AWOKE, and for a moment the complete darkness, in which there was no single ray of light, and the everlasting growl of the river, made it seem like a continuing bad dream. Then he remembered, and fumbled for his matches again.

Presently he had a fire going once more, but his relief was tempered by the thought of what it would be like here in unbroken darkness with the wood all burnt up; the realization that before that happened, he must venture into the river again and try to get out. Unless he could find some other way out, which was so unlikely as to be hardly worth considering.

He did want to explore, at any rate. Now, having piled on more wood and set the fire flaring high, driving back the dark, he looked about. Here at the water's edge it was easy to see the cause of the tumult. He had been too tired even to think about it before, but as he had guessed, the river made a bend, and about half of the current hurtled headlong, to smash against the solid wall of unyielding rock beyond, then was turned back upon itself in a wild whirl of waters, before sliding angrily away into the darkness beyond.

The rest of the flow was diverted to this more level shore; the current seemed to come in regular surges at about twenty-second intervals.

Luck had guided him to this protected section. The log which he had ridden had been twitched into the other current, smashed against the unyielding wall, and a half of it had washed back and drifted ashore here. By that much difference, he had escaped disaster.

Malcolm took a look overhead as the light flared higher. He did not expect to see much, but he felt his heart thump painfully. It was as though luck, that fickle jade, had decided to see how much he could take, and were enjoying tramping on his nerves.

He had expected, if he could see a ceiling overhead, to find it smooth like the rest. It was not that way at all. The light revealed something far less pleasant: a ceiling which was made of what appeared to be boulders, poised for a tumble at any moment. Up

above him was a vast chunk of the mountain, sagging like a sway-backed horse, and with a crack in the middle of it. Or that was the way it looked, as though the pressure from above had caused it to settle at that point where there was space below, and the ceiling had cracked—and were just about to break wide open and spill down.

For a few moments he watched it, fascinated, momentarily expecting to see the catastrophe happen. Then, grinning a little sheepishly, he realized that it had probably been that way for a long, long time—just like the overhang above the cavern, which had seemed in imminent danger of toppling for scores of years, before it finally had given way. In mountain country, there were numberless places such as that.

But this certainly looked real enough. In fact, there was a raw look to it, as though some chunks of rock had broken loose and tumbled, not very long before. They would have been swirled out of the way by the river, of course, if that had happened. But it wouldn't take very much of a jar really to shake things loose. More than ever, this didn't seem like a pleasant place to linger.

His fire was dying down again, and he threw more wood on it, then, selecting a pitchy stick of pine for a torch, explored beyond the rim of the light. The place, he saw, was something like the other cavern—it had definite limits, limits bounded by solid rock.

Hope mounted in him for a few moments. Here was what looked like a path by land, leading on downstream, back and high above the cliff where the frustrated current pounded, where a single misstep would send him plunging down into it, to be battered cruelly.

Then, beyond, was water again, where the path ended. A man might be able to wade in what appeared to be waist-deep water, but might be much deeper—wade for a few paces to where the pathway began again. But then, as the reflected light of his torch told him, it ended definitely, and there was only the darkly flowing river ahead.

He returned, his torch burning low, the thunder of the water just below him not reassuring. There was one other path—a sort of trail which it would be possible to climb up to the edge of the fault, or break, in the ceiling. Which was no satisfaction, since it would get a man nowhere.

Malcolm returned to the fire, facing it. He had to go on. The only alternative was to stay there and perish by slow starvation in

the endless night. But how should he go? He could follow that path, and slip into the river fairly easily—and safely below the whirlpool. But that would leave him on his own, and it was unlikely that he could swim long without support, in the unknown waters still to be faced.

His chances would be much better with that split half-log—but he could not negotiate that precarious path and pack a log with him. If he took the log, he had to go in where he was, and risk the tricky current, the smashing force of it against the wall, the kick-back of the whirlpool.

Success might be achieved by exact timing and strong swimming. For there was a pattern to this current. And it was that or nothing, he realized.

Throwing in a few sticks, he watched them, judged the pull of conflicting currents. It might be done. But even with that realization, it took the full spur of his will power before he could lift the log, then plunge out at what seemed the right moment. There was a hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach, and the renewed shock of the waters made them seem doubly icy. Then he was swimming, fighting to follow the course he had charted for himself. Behind, the fire flared momentarily higher, casting long crimson shadows across the water. An unseen force seemed clutching at his legs, striving to drag him down, to get him in its grip and smash him forward.

Only the added buoyancy of the log saved him. He fought past it; then again the onrushing river had him.

Chapter XX

In retrospect Malcolm realized that the first part of the trip had been a mild introduction to what the river could do. Now it was doing it. Malcolm could only guess at what was scattered there, but it had the feel of white water—of rapids, boulder-studded, but with the protesting monsters deep-set enough for the most part so that they only churned the water to shreds without quite being in the way to smash him as he went past, still clinging to his half-log.

He was tossed, whirled at a dizzy rate. Even at that, he realized

that he was still having good luck. He was alive, and there had been no curves, no other big whirlpools. Anything like that, at such a speed, would have spelled disaster.

Ahead, he had a faint glimpse of daylight, and sudden hope blossomed in him again, made ten times as strong by the thought of the open. Already it was increasing, testifying to the speed at which he was being hurried along. Now he remembered how the river burst out into the open—in a huge outpouring gush of water, tumbling for a score of feet into a great pool below, then picking itself up and rushing exultantly to taste freedom at last.

A few hours before, the thought of being shut out in such a fashion would have been unpleasant. Now he became indifferent. Besides, he had little enough time for thinking, for all at once he was being ducked under as his log turned. But now there was green water, instead of black—the green of daylight up above.

He seemed still to be going down, with water all around and over him—down and down, still clinging to the log, until his lungs ached, before it suddenly plowed to the surface again, shooting up with such violence, like a released cork, that it jumped away from him. But here there was sunshine overhead, and the cool green of a fir tree a few feet away at the pool's edge.

The water shoaled under him, and he climbed out. It had been night when he had first entered the tunnel. Now it was mid-forenoon, as the sunshine testified—a fresh, crisp, utterly pleasant morning—the most bewilderingly gorgeous day that he had ever beheld.

Malcolm stood for a moment, his feet on dry ground, dripping, looking around. He seemed to be seeing the earth and all its wonders for the first time. There was beauty here, such as he had never really beheld before. Seeing it, he realized that he had never before actually looked at it. Life—and all that it held, was wonderful, full of unsuspected riches.

The things which he had taken so for granted were new. New and fresh, on his return from a darkness from which he had never expected to emerge. He looked about and shook himself, marveling anew at his luck.

Only a few days before, it had seemed that it had all run out on him since he had returned to his home range. Which only went to show that you never knew your luck.

His gun, the one that Verity had given him, was gone like the

others, lost somewhere in the river chasm. It seemed as though he just couldn't hang onto guns any more. He grinned at the thought. Who needed a gun? There were better weapons, if you knew how to use them.

Off ahead, he could see the newly formed lake, where Black River was backed up by the dam which Buell Pearson had made there only a little while before. That, too, along with the other events of yesterday, seemed a long way removed from today and its realities, its possibilities.

He studied the lake thoughtfully, observing how the river, exactly as Pearson had planned it, had broken off across the meadows to the southward sometime during the night. It was running there now, exploring a new path for itself. The old channel, below the dam, was a lost-looking thing of mud and rocks beginning to gleam whitely, like dry bones—save for occasional deep pools.

His face sobered. That would mean dry bones for the ranchers on down below, a little later on, unless something was done for them. But what could be done? It would be a herculean task, even without opposition, to remove the dam and let the river back into its old channel. A vast amount of dirt and rock had toppled to form that barrier. A charge of dynamite had shaken it loose, but an equal charge, or several bigger ones, would have little or no effect on it now, sprawled out as it was.

From there, his gaze ranged off toward the distant buildings of Black River Ranch again—out of sight from there, but not too far away. On to the mountain, back again to the valley. The new river was like a silver thread under the sun.

It was the drumming sound of gunfire which jerked him back to the reality of immediate problems.

The shooting was coming from over the rise, somewhere in or near the buildings, which probably meant from the mouth of the tunnel, there at the foot of the hill.

It took no stretch of the imagination to guess what was happening. Buell Pearson had been an interested spectator, ever since the attempt had been made to get into the cavern again and to recover that lost cache of treasure. Now he had it figured that the others had reached the cavern, and so he intended to take over.

Which would mean that one crew—representing an already lost hope and a second hope as surely dying, giving allegiance to a

foreign king—were shooting it out with the other bunch, gun-slingers hired for just that purpose by Buell Pearson.

Likely Pearson had the others trapped at, or in, the tunnel. And those trapped would, of course, include Case McClay.

Malcolm considered that with a sort of detached interest. It was no longer any particular business of his. Though Pearson probably did not know it, he had frustrated that whole plot, so that the core of the matter, the loot, was out of reach of them all. If they wanted to fight over a bone already picked clean, what did that matter to him? Both sides—every man, in fact—were against him. Let them do a good job, while they were shooting at each other.

Then a new thought brought him up with a jerk. Verity!

Maybe she was still there, too. In fact, it was likely. And caught in the middle. That made a difference.

He moved unhurriedly, keeping to the brush and coulees, so that he could see without being seen. For the first time, there was activity about the buildings, instead of that air of desertion. Horses scattered about, men on foot. A big crew. Here were gathered, not alone Tillicum, but Wolf Track as well.

They were all working together, in perfect amity. He saw Buell Pearson and John Gordy discussing matters. If there had ever been any doubt in his mind, it was dispelled now. Gordy and Pearson were in this thing together; their surface rivalry had been only dust in the eyes of the public.

Events of the past few days had finally forced Pearson into the open. He was so certain now that he had full control of everything that he was contemptuous of public opinion, yet not too much so. He was still a shrewd hand at this sort of game, as was apparent when, having worked closer, Malcolm could hear them planning.

"There's no great hurry," Pearson was saying. "We got all the time in the world—time's workin' on our side now. They're trapped in that tunnel—McClay and his whole crew. And there's just one way out. And we're sittin' here, like a cat watchin' a hole."

"They got one argument," Gordy pointed out thoughtfully.

"What?" Pearson demanded contemptuously.

"The gold."

"What good'll that do them? When they want to come out, they'll have to do it on our terms—and that'll include giving up any loot they got hold of."

"Mebby." Gordy was dubious. "Mebby not. They could chuck it away, to keep us from gettin' it—if they was sure enough that it wouldn't do them any good."

Pearson scowled.

"We'll bargain with 'em," he decided. "After we get control—that's diff'rent."

"That'll be the best way, I reckon," Gordy agreed, relieved.

"Sure. Like I say, we got time on our side. Why, look at it. What're they tryin' to do but steal gold for a foreign government? That's plain treason. Puts us square on the side of law an' order, patriotic and all. We got the world by the tail on a down-hill pull."

"That's a good line," Gordy agreed. "But don't overplay it. If we get our hands on that gold, we don't want federal authorities comin' in here and claimin' it."

"If they come, we'll turn it over to them," Pearson said easily. " 'Course," he added slyly, "some of it might have got lost durin' the years—but who's to know where it went?"

Gordy echoed the grin.

"Anyway, who's to prove it?" he agreed.

There was no doubt of it, they were in perfect understanding and accord. For the moment, Malcolm lost interest. There was no more shooting going on now. The cook, brought along from Tillicum so they'd be ready for a siege, was busy dishing up breakfast for the combined crews. And that operation, however belated, interested Malcolm very much.

Since the cook was working beside a clump of trees and brush, it was not difficult for him to slip around and help himself to a well filled plate as it was set on a rock, while the cook turned to do something else. That worthy seemed a little puzzled, later on, but apparently figured that one of the extra men was responsible, and raised no protest.

It was good grub, Malcolm conceded, cleaning his plate. He had a new sense of well-being now. And since there seemed to be little going on, and no immediate prospect of anything, he found a remote, well hidden spot and, stretching out, went to sleep.

When he awoke, he saw that the sun was past its zenith, and that something new had disturbed him. It was easy to see what. A lot of newcomers were on the scene now—men from town, or from other neighboring ranches—those who were friendly to Tillicum.

Pearson had changed, outwardly at least. Apparently, he had received little satisfaction trying to bargain with those trapped inside the tunnel. Now he was blustering.

"I'm tired of foolin'," he announced. "We'll give them their choice. They can come out an' surrender, hands in air. Or if they don't want to do that, but prefer stayin' holed up, why, that's up to them. We'll just set a charge o' dynamite and blast the mouth of the tunnel shut. That'll dispose of 'em for good and all, and be only what a set of traitors deserve. We've had too many o' that breed around here lately, any way you look at it."

His pose as the friend of law and order, against those who were not only beyond the pale of the law, but were treason-tainted as well, was a role which was immensely popular, and Pearson was enjoying it to the full. The bad effect caused by his other blast, which had dammed Black River, was being at least partly offset by this new role as the champion of the law. Only Gordy seemed a little doubtful.

"What about the loot?" he demanded, as soon as he could get Pearson off to one side. "That way, we lose all chance of ever gettin' it!"

Pearson laughed.

"That way, we don't lose or divvy up any," he contradicted. "With them dead, and the excitement blown over, we just tunnel straight into the cave, through the old slide. And when we find it, we keep it!"

Chapter XXI

A GOOD SLEEP had helped a lot. Malcolm felt ready for whatever might come now. He was able to guess pretty accurately that, in the parleying which Pearson had been carrying on with those now cornered in the tunnel shaft, Case McClay had been shrewd enough to use the treasure as a talking point. A successful one, up to now.

Case, of course, knew that the treasure was somewhere in the bottom of Black River. He also knew Pearson and Gordy well enough to know that his life, and the lives of those whom he was now

leading, depended on his making Pearson think that they had it, until they were out where they had at least a fighting chance.

His ruse had worked—so far. But now Pearson had hit upon a scheme which suited him better. If he made terms, that would inevitably mean sharing the treasure. Even if he managed to renege on any agreement with Case, once they were ont, by dubbing them traitors, there would still be all these other witnesses that he had the cache. And that would mean, no matter how he squirmed, that a large share of the wealth would have to be turned over to its rightful owners, the government. Otherwise, he too would be classed as a thief and traitor—and by someone strong enough to do some unpleasant things about it.

This other scheme, coldly murderous as it was, offered a way out of that dilemma. And Gordy was quick to approve it.

"We'll go parley a spell longer, just to make it look right," Pearson added. "Then we'll get mad and put in a blast an' blow it shut—and forget the whole thing till the others have forgot all about it."

"Sure," Gordy agreed. "Only be careful, in talkin', not to make any terms with 'em."

Pearson chuckled.

"I'll sure watch out for that," he acquiesced.

Malcolm hesitated. The man was a smooth worker, and public opinion, for the moment at least, was behind him. He considered stepping out into the open, denouncing the whole monstrous scheme. But that was a last resort. He'd still be treated as a traitor, and Pearson and Gordy would of course deny everything that he said.

There might be a better way. He moved back up the hill a bit, among the trees, to where he could look around again, and there, as he had hoped might be the case, were other men—ten or a dozen of them, off by the new dam, gazing dourly at the river. Even at that distance, he could recognize Sam Forbes.

By now, of course, they would have learned that he had shown up in Bald Butte again, after they had left him to die, and so would know that, somehow, he had escaped from the trap. Though they still probably felt that he had double-crossed them, it was likely that a natural revulsion of feeling would have set in, so that they would be rather relieved than otherwise that his blood was not on their hands.

Freed of that guilty knowledge, knowing that things were going on at the ranch, they had been drawn as by a magnet. But they still

did not care to mingle with Pearson and his friends, and so they were off here, dourly watching their own ruin take shape, hour by hour.

It should be a good time for his purpose. Malcolm circled, then stepped suddenly out into the open, almost beside them.

Perhaps they had heard additional rumors concerning him, to the effect that he had been trapped in the river, deep inside the mountain, since that other escape. In any event, they stared at him now as if not quite sure whether he was a man or a ghost. Malcolm advanced, grinning.

"Howdy, boys," he greeted them.

Stapelton, who had led the pack against him, looked as if he were not at all happy. The others were definitely uneasy. It was honest Sam Forbes who answered.

"I'm damn glad to see you, Malcolm—an' alive. We acted like a bunch of skunks."

"Worse'n that—fools," Stapelton blurted. "I'm sure regretful about it—and glad it didn't work. But how—"

"A friend found me and cut me loose yesterday," Malcolm answered the unvoiced question. "I don't much blame you boys, considerin'. But you ought to know by now that it was all a trick on Pearson's part. I didn't sell out. He just blasted that hill down, then tried to shift the blame on to me, seein' that you wanted somebody to take your spite out on."

They looked sheepish at that, and murmured agreement. Stapelton ventured another question.

"But how in blazes are you here?" he demanded. "We heard that you was in that tunnel, last night—in the old cave—and that they shot you, and you tumbled into the river!" Awe and something like fear were in his face. "Are—is it really you?"

"I'm real enough," Malcolm replied. "They shot *at* me—and I went into the river. I went clear through the channel, and came out there." He gestured to where Black River burst out of the mountain. "Guess I was lucky."

"Lucky! Through that river?" The awe was something more than that now. "Man, you're a fool for luck, is all I got to say," Forbes exclaimed.

"Reckon you're right," Malcolm agreed. "I sure wouldn't want to try it again. But I didn't have much choice. It was that, or go in

after I'd been filled so full of lead that I'd sink. But do you know what Pearson's cookin' up now?"

Briefly he told them of the accord between Pearson and Gordy, of what they planned to do. He did not tell them what had happened to the treasure-box. That knowledge, or lack of it, might still be an ace in the hole before this game was played to its end.

Heart-sick over what they had done the day before, anxious to make amends, they believed him readily. And as full understanding came to them, their smouldering resentment against Pearson was beginning to grow to a hot flame of anger.

"Reckon he's got us licked, no matter what we do, so far's the river is concerned," Stapelton growled. "But when we get through with him, he'll have a mighty thin profit out of his double-dealin'. You go ahead, Malcolm. We're right with you. First off, we'll stop this scheme to murder them others."

"I figure the best way is to kind of get 'em surrounded, then come out with guns on them," Malcolm suggested. "Once we've got the drop, we can handle things. Otherwise, the way they outnumber us, and with a gamble like he's workin' for, Pearson might not stop at a little more killing. We'll work it to get the boys out of the tunnel, and then, with Case on our side, we can do some parleyin'."

That part of the program suited them perfectly. They moved and took their stations as Malcolm directed; he could see that the other discussion was still going on at the tunnel-mouth. It was open and easy to see now, everything which had helped to hide it from the world having been ripped away, so that the men trapped within would have no chance to slip out unseen.

"Seems like they're that stubborn, they won't make terms, nor surrender," Pearson announced wrathfully to the others. "And I've had a bellyful. If they want to stay in there so bad, they can do it—, till doomsday. Just the sort of treatment that such a set o' traitors need—"

He stopped, his jaw going a little slack, as Malcolm stepped suddenly out into sight, a gun leveled. Other voices came from all sides, other guns were menacing them. Even his crew had been caught flat-footed by the suddenness of the whole thing.

"We'll let them come out, since we're plenty strong to handle them," Malcolm said levelly, "instead of murderin' 'em as you'd figured. Any objections, Pearson?"

"And don't start anything, none of you—'less yuh want to eat lead," Stapelton added laconically. "We know all about yore whole double-crossin' deal, from A to Izzard, Buell Pearson. And we'd like nothin' better than the excuse to let a few brands of daylight into you and your yeller-bellied crew here—"

"Murder?" Pearson protested. "I don't know what you're talking about. Sometimes a little persuasion's a good thing, when hombres are stubborn." He stared at Malcolm with narrowed eyes, ignoring Stapelton. "Looks to me like you fellows ain't too choice about whom you associate with," he added obliquely.

"Sometimes we have to get close to polecats, like it or not—same as now," Stapelton returned bitingly. "It ain't pleasant, Pearson!"

Buell Pearson's heavy face went a shade redder, but he checked the retort which arose to his lips, and shrugged. Things were not going as he had planned, but on the whole he was still satisfied. He had control of the river and the grass of the lower valley, come what might. That had been his first and biggest gamble, and he had won. This other was far from over yet, far from passing beyond his control.

"You can holster those guns," he said. "We ain't going to make any fuss. If you can get them to see reason and come out, so much the better. That's what we been tryin' to do."

At Malcolm's order, the guns were sheathed. It looked like a minor victory for Pearson, but the gesture had accomplished its purpose, shown him that this was no bluff. Malcolm crossed to the mouth of the tunnel, calling out:

"Are you there, Case? I'd like to talk this over."

There followed a long moment of silence. Then Case McClay's voice answered, incredulous.

"What the blazes? That sounded like you, Monty!"

"Of course. Who did you think it would be?" Malcolm demanded, hiding a grin. "Come out here where we can talk. It's all right."

This time, without hesitation, Case came into the light. His face was a study.

"If you say so, Monty, I guess it's so," he agreed. "But I'm plumb flabbergasted. You can't be alive—and if you are, I'd think you'd be gunnin' for me. But if you say it's all right, here I am."

"I'm alive," Malcolm assured him. "And I reckon we understand each other, Case. No personal grudges. Anyway, after what you did

once, I'd be pretty small to hold the other against you now. Where is Verity?"

"Guess she went back to town last night," Case said. "I hope so."

That was a consolation.

"The rest of you better come on out," Malcolm suggested. "We'll give your men a chance to hit south and leave the country."

Case eyed him quizzically for a moment, then nodded.

"Couldn't ask for fairer," he said and, still studying Malcolm's expressionless face, added: "Special since we ain't been able to find nothin' in there. Nothin' to stay for, any longer."

Buell Pearson had watched in silence. Now he spoke.

"It sounds to me like you two was in cahoots about this," he said. "In any case, *I'm* going to take a look around in there to make sure about things."

"Suits me," Malcolm agreed. "This is my land, but if you can find anything back in there, I'll be right int'rested."

Pearson started to scowl, smoothed his face again.

"A lot of folks will be," he said. "Your men can git, like he says. Easiest way. But that don't go for you, McClay. Nor for Malcolm. There's a heap of things that a lot of folks—includin' the law—are right int'rested in findin' out about the two of you."

"Sure," Case nodded. "But I can tell you a few things, Pearson. I'm what he's been accused of being—secret service for the Army of the Confederacy. And I'm not ashamed of it. As for him, he's secret service, only on the other side. The game's played out, and lost. I couldn't have lost to a better man, Monty. But when it comes to handlin' things, Pearson, just remember that he represents the army and the Federal Government."

"That's a nice-soundin' story, but we'll make sure about it before we go too far." Pearson shrugged. Malcolm knew that Case had planted the warning, before these witnesses, for a purpose. Men were looking at him curiously now, with new respect in their eyes—something which he had not seen in a long while.

It was pleasant, in a way—but he had a hunch that the trouble was still far from over. The others were filing out of the tunnel now at Case's order, hands in air, submitting to a search. Then they were told that they could get out of the country, and warned to do so.

Monsieur Philippe's army, formidable not long before, was finished now—as their master across the border soon would be, by the in-

exorable march of events. If they had gotten hold of the treasure, they would have fought savagely to keep it. But knowing what they did, all that they wanted now was a chance to get away.

There was a sort of surface amity between the two groups from the valley now, an armed truce. Since neither Case nor Malcolm offered any objection to a search being made of the cavern, Buell Pearson went in, with several of his men. But Malcolm noted that he left Gordy and a picked crew on guard outside, against any possible treachery of the sort that he had planned to mete out to the others.

Case looked at Malcolm, a question in his eyes.

"Let's get back to town," Malcolm said. "I'd like to find Verity. And there's nothing else to do here."

Forbes looked to him for orders.

"How about it—if he finds somethin'?"he asked.

Case shrugged.

"He won't," he said.

They mounted and rode toward town. And near the outskirts they met Verity, riding out, her anxiety having forced her to come to see what was happening. At the sight of the two of them together, her face was a study. Then it cleared.

"I didn't know—" she said. "What happened?"

It was Case who told her, not sparing himself.

"I'm glad it's over," he said. "And now that's turned out this way, I'm glad about that, too. I did what there was to do. Monty here is a Yankee—but I guess mebby there's worse things than some Yankees."

"And you—you're a Federal officer?" Verity asked, her eyes on Malcolm's face.

"Don't blame him for doing his duty," Case said quietly. "I'm a wanted man, when it comes to that. And he has a job to do."

"The war's over," Malcolm said shortly. His voice sounded harsh in his own ears. "I'm ridin' on into town. You can come when you get ready—Verity."

He saw the incredulity, the sudden glow of hope in Case's eyes, the warmer look in Verity's as she understood. Then he turned his back and rode ahead. Night would soon be with them again, and a man could ride far in a night, particularly if freedom was his goal.

Chapter XXII

IF THERE HAD BEEN tension in the air before, it was now like a fiddle string ready to snap—keyed high and shrill and out of tune. Truculence hung over the valley like a fog. It emanated from Tillicum, where Buell Pearson was savage in his frustration, an angry grizzly. It was a miasma above the lower valley, where by now only slowly sinking pools remained of the timeless river. Iron had been driven into the souls of men, and iron would come out again, like sword points aglitter in the sun.

Malcolm relaxed in the saddle, viewing the new course of the river with somber eyes. Black River! It was aptly named—more so even than those who had first dubbed it that could have guessed. There was no clearer, sweeter, more sparkling water to be found, yet it was a darkly somber stream, entwined with the destinies of men.

Malcolm had hoped that Case McClay would make use of the chance to leave the country. But Case had not done so. He was still on Fishhook, still riding in the open. Malcolm thought that he knew why. It would be, in part at least, because of Anobel Peters. A good reason a man should not run away, of course.

And then there was a streak of stubbornness in Case, of sharp honesty also. If he had been wrong, he would pay the price of his mistakes.

That much was easy to understand. And there might possibly be a third reason. It seemed unlikely. Yet everyone seemed to think now that this was an unfinished game, not yet played to the end. And twisted motives can bring strange thoughts to the minds of men.

Malcolm's gaze sharpened. A group of riders were gathering off there—familiar figures, all of them. The groups, in point of fact, joining, but warily, like wolves snarling at each other. He reined his horse ahead.

The men from down-river, the dispossessed, had come once again for a look, as men will do when frustrated, seeking desperately, hopelessly, for a way out where there is no way. They had been coming there almost every day, staring grimly at the dam, at the new course

of the river, discussing the matter, departing again with no solution in sight, but with an ever-tightening anger.

Malcolm had seen them before. So, of course, had Buell Pearson. Pearson had kept away—until today. Now, with his crew riding at heel, he had come to this meeting.

His voice came, blunt with impatience, tinged with arrogance. He sat there, solid in the saddle, leaning a little forward, sure of his own position now.

"You fellows make me tired! Can't you face facts? When you're licked, you're licked—and that's all there is to it. You can't turn the river again, and you know it as well as I do. Without it, your land's worthless. I offered you two dollars an acre once. You wouldn't talk to me. Well, I'm makin' another offer now—and it's my last. Four bits an acre. If you want that much, better take it now."

"Fifty cents!" Stapelton protested. "Why, two dollars was dirt cheap. But it's still worth as much to you as it ever was."

"That ain't the point," Pearson said. "It ain't worth anything to you. It's a matter of getting out with something, or getting out with nothing. Suits me either way. Take your choice."

Bitter, they were none the less seriously considering it, Malcolm could see. It meant ruin either way—but a few dollars would at least take them to a new country, give them a chance to start over again.

If there was any solution, Malcolm knew, it lay in his hands, and his alone. If he failed—

Buell Pearson did not shift as Malcolm rode up. He did swing his head a little, like a grizzly, and hostility was in his eyes.

"I wouldn't sell, if I were you fellows—not yet a while, at any rate," Malcolm suggested, and saw the dim spark of hope which came to them. Pearson's stare was like loaded bullets.

"Best keep out of this, Malcolm," he warned. "You ain't doing them no kindness, givin' such advice. I'm makin' the offer—for now. It's take it now, or not at all."

"It's up to you, of course," Malcolm returned. "I'd still advise you to wait."

He swung his horse again. Now he was committed. He'd known all along what he had to do, and had shrunk from it, drawing back at the mere approach of the thought, assuring himself that since no

one knew, no one could blame him. And a man would be a fool to take such a risk.

But a man had to live with himself. That was something you couldn't get away from. Now, he knew, they would take his advice. Now he was in for it.

He had left them all behind, out of sight. Here were the buildings of Black River Ranch, once again looking deserted and ramshackle. They had ceased to twist his heart so sharply, and this time he was glad of his solitude. He left his horse to drowse in the sun, sun which was warm and very pleasant today, so that he shivered as he looked at it.

The old tool shed was still there. In the last few days, men had stored things from the tunnel in it. Malcolm knew what was in there. He had checked, the day before.

He worked for a few minutes, choosing his materials, rolling them into a compact bundle, wrapping the whole tightly in a slicker. This should work, if anything would. He stepped out into the sunlight again, and stopped, for once at a loss.

For two days now he had not seen her. He had, in fact, taken care to remain away from town. And today she should have been in her shop, since it was a business day. But Verity was there, the sun warm on her face, still in the saddle, watching him. His own horse, still saddled, was there, and of course she had seen it.

He tried for words, and could find none. And her own voice was curiously flat.

"What are you going to do, Monty?"

"Do? Why—" He looked at her, back to the pack in his hand, to his own waiting horse. "Why, I—you see—"

"You aren't going away, are you?" she asked. "Not leaving?"

It was an answer, the best one, under the circumstances, and he took it.

"Why yes, I guess that's the size of it, Verity," he agreed. "I—well—you know how it is. There's nothing to keep me here—" He gestured toward the buildings, refusing to meet her eyes. "And after you've been fiddle-footed as long as I have, you sort of get the habit."

"I suppose so," she agreed. "Only I didn't think that you were a quitter, Monty."

"I guess there's a lot you don't know about me," he said bleakly.

Verity nodded, and her eyes were somber. Yet there was a sort of pride in them as well as she looked at him.

"Probably," she agreed. "But you're not a quitter, Monty. And you're lying now. So don't run too many risks. It isn't worth it."

She swung her horse about suddenly, and away at a spurring gallop. And it seemed to him that a sob had choked in her throat, and that there had been the gleam of tears in her eyes.

Chapter XXIII

MALCOLM STARED after her, taken aback. How much did she know? Had she guessed his purpose? He glanced down at the bundle in his hand, his mouth tightening. Of course. She was no fool—far from it. She had seen him come out of that shed, and she must have known what it contained. The sort of bundle he would make up in there would not be what a man would use on a journey. Yet he was going on a journey!

She had ridden out to see him, since he had remained away. And she had made her appeal—all that she would ever make, he knew, since she was of the South, and of a fiery pride. Doubly proud in this case, because her brother was Case McClay, with all that that involved.

Yet, guessing shrewdly at what he intended, she had not asked him not to do it. She had merely urged him not to take too many risks!

But it was no longer a matter of choice. Now he was committed. His step suddenly brisk, Malcolm crossed to his horse. He stripped off saddle and bridle, gave the animal a pat on the rump. Now the cayuse would be all right, in any case.

Carrying his package, he entered the mouth of the tunnel. There was a lantern here, and he lit it, commenced the climb once more. The last time that any man would ever go that way.

Today it seemed darker, more lonely than ever. The ceaseless echo from the cavern was like a roar that almost shook the mountain. The light, as he climbed, wavered and flickered. Even without it,

his lungs told him the story. The air was stagnant now, growing bad with disuse. It was high time to get on with the job.

He reached the cavern, panting. In there, where the rush of the river had its own effect, the air was better. But the river itself showed as darkly unfriendly as ever. It was one thing to do a job when you were forced, given no choice, and quite another to compel yourself to such a course, knowing what lay ahead.

Pearson's crew had done a lot of digging. They had worked for a couple of days in a sort of frenzy, not quite knowing what they were searching for, realizing that the chance of finding it was slight, fighting the piled earth which the slide had brought—doing it more or less haphazardly before finally abandoning it as a bad job. More sticks had been unearthed and flung aside.

This gave him a choice of logs of convenient size. Malcolm selected one. He set the lantern down, wondering how long it would burn in the deep gloom before going out. Not that it mattered. Then, working feverishly, he grabbed the log, threw it and himself out and down

Once he had been swept under the rocky portals and there was no turning back, it was not so bad. His mind was working again, cool and ready. He was physically rested, in much better shape than before. Even inside, that old feeling of sore rawness had pretty much disappeared. Apparently he was healing up at last.

Now the added thunder was in his ears. He felt the savage suck of the whirlpool—hung for what seemed an eternity, with one current swirling at the beach, the other fiercely dragging at him. Then he was loose, and on the beach again. Even his log was still with him, this time.

Malcolm built a fire, then unstrapped his pack. Overhead was the fault, just as he had remembered it. But what else was overhead, where the flicker of the light did not reach? Well, it was too late to count risks now. He checked the pack carefully.

Dynamite, caps, fuse. The crack overhead looked as if it were all ready to break, to cause the roof to sag down, to bottle the cavern up as though a cork had been shoved in.

A lantern would be handy, but a torch would have to do. It was not hard to climb the path up to the edge of the crack, or to insert the dynamite, and touch his torch to the end of the fuse. But what was to follow would not be so easy.

Where he was forced to wade, shoulder-deep, along the path

down-river, he lost his torch. Now he was beyond the crimson glow cast by the dying fire. Here, with the dark waters in restless turmoil close at hand, he felt like the lone survivor of a lost race.

He had not long to wait. At first it was curiously disappointing—like a firecracker, a pop where he had been expecting a roar.

Nothing seemed to happen. It looked as if he had guessed wrong—as if the whole gamble were turning out a dud. In which case there would probably be no chance for a second guess.

But then, as though it had required a few moments to set rusty machinery in motion, to shake loose the inertia of ages, things began to happen. First it was a grinding, pushing noise, above the angry overtones of the river. There was no light left in which to see. The fire had gone out as though blown by a giant's breath.

Sound swelled like a pipe organ, and Malcolm had the sensation that the whole mountain was caving in, sliding down where that crack in the ceiling had been. The solid ground beneath his feet rocked, almost throwing him off-balance.

Water rushed at him, coming above his knees in a swift surge, then drained away as quickly. There was a stench of dust in his nostrils, though not so much as with an ordinary slide, for there had been a lot of rock here, and a lot of water in which to drop. The splash of it had settled part of the dust.

Now the motion was subsiding, like a growl dying in a dog's throat. There was still a grinding, settling noise of the great pile which had filled the cavern up above him—for how far, he could only guess. Then as it stopped, he realized all at once that the noise of the water had stopped too, save for an ebbing sound somewhere on downstream.

It had worked! The thing had been ready to set off, requiring only a nudge to bring it tumbling, filling the cavern, blocking the channel of Black River, there in the middle of the mountain. Now indeed the waters would be frustrated, turned back on themselves. In the end, more than the river would know that feeling of frustration.

Malcolm took a few cautious steps back up the path, wondering how much leeway there had been, before the edge of the slide would have reached and covered him. At the second step, his foot encountered a rock which had not been there before—a small boulder, half as high as himself. Two steps beyond it was the edge of the new spill—filling the whole space where the whirlpool had been, reaching up in a rough sort of hill.

He turned downstream, wading cautionsly, stumbling over new stones. The water was not very deep. Most of the pool had been filled by new debris; the excess water had already drained away. Here was the old channel which led down-river—and to a tiny gleam of daylight far ahead.

Chapter XXIV

IT WAS SLIPPERY in there, dank and wet and hard to flounder along. But at its worst it was so much better than it might have been that Malcolm had no complaints on that score. His eyes were accustomed to the gloom, and now there was light enough filtering back from the outside to serve his need.

There was, for the most part, surprisingly little water. The rocky floor had sloped sharply, save for a few pools. There were upthrusts of rock, boulders whose presence he had felt in the troubled waters while making the first trip out, but he could pick his way around them. And he saw with a growing excitement that there was something else—superficially resembling another stone, bent and battered but still recognizable for what it was—the chest.

Malcolm eyed it incredulously. He had known that there was a chance that it might be somewhere along in there, where the waters had shoved and tossed it, but he had not built any hopes on finding it. It was more than possible that the chest had slipped out of the hollow log long before the log had struck and split. In that case, it could be back behind the new obstruction in the channel, forever buried from human gaze.

Or it could have been carried clear on outside, into the depths of that newly formed lake—or lost somewhere in here beneath mud and debris.

Yet here it was, still fast shut, for all the pounding it had taken while being hustled and rolled by the savage current.

It was wedged between two boulders, so that he had to work and tug at it for a while to get it loose. From the heft of it, there was no doubt that the contents were still intact. He straightened as he stared

down at it—shivering partly from chill, for he was soaked, and partly at sight of the strong-box.

Elation should have filled him, he knew. Here was the crowning touch of victory, vindication for himself. But he was thinking of the history of that treasure—or loot, as some men had called it—the trouble which had gone with it. Always it was the same, when a treasure horde was found. Greed and selfishness entered the picture, and blood and death followed relentlessly at their heels.

A lot of men had died already because of this, and probably more men would die, sooner or later. Which raised a problem: how to get it out of there and safe to its destination without more trouble.

He lifted it, finding it no light task, and held it there in his hands for a moment. It was too heavy to pack out of there by himself, to carry very far. Too conspicuous a thing, once he was out in the open—

"Your luck's still runnin' high, eh, Monty?"

He seemed to freeze at the words, pleasant as they were. Working to extricate the box, his back partly turned to the source of light, absorbed in his task, he had heard nothing. Now he turned slowly, carefully putting the box down on top of one of the boulders which had helped to pin it fast before.

Case McClay stood a few paces away, hands on hips, a curious half-smile playing about his mouth.

"Hope I didn't startle you, Monty," he said. "Guess I didn't, or you'd have dropped it. You've got steady nerves."

Malcolm eyed him carefully, saying nothing. As was always the case, when trouble came into the picture these days, he was unarmed. You could do a lot without a gun, but there were times when one could be handy. Case, he observed, was packing two of them today, nestled in holsters at either hip.

Observing his glance, Case nodded. His smile was sardonic, as though he mocked Malcolm, himself, and all the world.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I'm thinkin' just what you're guessin' that I am, Monty. One reason I decided to stick around after you said I could pull my freight was because I knew you—and if you wanted me to go, that was a good reason for stayin'."

He was silent a moment, sober now; then he went on.

"Maybe I'm wrong—*quien sabe?* as my Mexican friends would put it. Maybe not. I've no love for Maximilian, you'll understand,

though I guess he's not too bad a hombre, personally. He's just been shoved around into a right tough spot, that wasn't of his own choosing, and he's doing the best he can with it. I've got sort of a fellow-feelin' for the old boy."

Still Malcolm said nothing. No whit abashed, Case went on.

"Verity would say I'm wrong. Maybe I am. Maybe not. But when I start a job, I always try to finish it. And you never know how luck will run. Particularly when *you're* on the other end of the deal. Eh, Monty?"

"You always did have a habit of hangin' on, like a dog to a root," Malcolm conceded.

"Guess I'm bull-headed," Case agreed. "But it pays . . . Only thing is, I wish it didn't have to be settled between the two of us, every time. Seems like this thing never does get really settled. I don't like that part of it."

Again, as Malcolm made no reply, he went on, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"If we'd just been on the same side—or things had been diff'rent, somehow—for instance, if I was just a cowboy, I could get a lot of fun out of that. I like this country. And I reckon the folks here owe you a lot—all but Buell Pearson and John Gordy. They're going to be fit to bite themselves, when they find what you've done this time."

"If they do, they'll sure get hydrophoby," Malcolm retorted, with the edge of a smile.

"They sure will," Case agreed heartily. "And serve 'em right." He sobered again. "They're skunks—and now Verity thinks I'm the same sort. Guess she would have, a lot of times, if she'd known."

He mused a minute, and Malcolm knew that he was thinking long thoughts of the past, of the weaving of the pattern which had led inexorably up to this moment. Fate was that way, or destiny, call it what you would. Either you fulfilled your destiny, or you knew yourself for a quitter, doomed to slink down the dark corridors of time. Sometimes, whatever might be the judgment of men, it took a lot of courage to stand up to your task.

"I've had a lot of surprises in my day," Case went on, his smile returning. "Seein' you turn up the other day, to call off Pearson and his pack, after I'd figured that you was in a right watery grave—that was the biggest, I guess—up to today. But when I heard kind of a growl deep in the mountain a while ago, and then water started

spoutin' out of that tunnel mouth, there by your old house, geyserin' up so that it near drowned me before I could get back out of the way —well, I guess that was the prize. It came out of that hole, shootin' for two hundred feet like at bat out of hell, muddy and boilin'—man, it was somethin'!"

The development was not surprising. It was, in fact, what Malcolm had been working for. With its normal course plugged up, the water had to find an exit somewhere. And the tunnel, leading out and down from the big cavern, inadequate as it was, was the most logical course. The water would follow that line of least resistance, gouging the shaft and widening it as it went.

"Must have been worth seein'," he suggested.

Clay nodded.

"I watched it a little while," he agreed. "Sure pretty. And then I got to thinkin' about where it was comin' from, and headed over this way to see if my hunch was right. And sure enough, Black River had changed its whole course again. Instead of spoutin' out of the mountain here, same as it'd been doing, there was just a little trickle. And as I stood there and listened, it seemed to me like I heard somethin', way back up in here—like a man walkin'. Funny, how sounds like that will carry—kind of an echo, I guess."

His eyes had grown very intent and watchful now.

"I wasn't just too anxious to wander up in here for a look, I'll admit. I didn't like being holed up in that tunnel, and this could be worse. But I had a hunch that it was you who was in here, and if you could do it, I sort of had to. It kind of worried me—what if something should bust loose again, and the water start comin' back? But I didn't have much to lose, I decided, and on the other hand, the time to get hold of a chance is when it comes along. So I guess that brings us right down to the present, eh, Monty?"

"I guess it does," Malcolm agreed. "It's your move, Case."

Case eyed him sharply.

"You look wet as a drowned rat," he said. "Which I guess ain't very surprisin'. But one can't afford to go by appearances—not with you. A man gets fooled. Still, I reckon you haven't got a gun on you, eh?"

"No gun," Malcolm agreed.

Case sighed.

"Probably wouldn't be in workin' order, anyhow, if you did have," he said. "Here, catch!"

Deftly he lifted one of his holstered guns, flipped it through the air toward Malcolm, who caught it as dextrously.

"It's loaded," Case said, as Malcolm slipped it into his waist band, "same as this other gun, all the way. Puts us on more of an even footing."

"You're rather a fool, you know, Case," Malcolm commented, "in a lot of ways."

Case sighed again.

"Don't I know it!" he asked. "There's some jobs that I don't like —and then there's Verity. I didn't think she'd feel the way she does. Things are always getting complicated, not going right at all. But when a job has to be done, it has to be done. I don't notice you stoppin', even when you'd be showin' a lot better sense to do it.

"The trouble with me, I guess," he went on, "is that I'm sort of a philosopher, too. A good killer ought to be able to just think of getting his job done, and let it go at that. Like I managed when I put that bullet in your hat the other day. But I didn't really know you then. So I couldn't do it that way, not a second time."

"You could have ridden out of the country," Malcolm suggested.

"Yeah. It was nice of you to give me the chance. Only—well, I couldn't go—even if I hadn't felt that you'd bear watchin'. And as to the way things are now, Monty—well, there's been a lot of ruckus in this country lately—enough so that the government will be sendin' in and askin' a lot of questions. They have long memories, special where money is concerned. And I'm on their list—you know that. The average soldier, he was told to take his mule and head for home. That wouldn't apply to me. Even with you sayin' a good word for me, they'd still stand me up against a wall."

And there, Malcolm knew, was the real answer. That was what kept Case fighting in his own way to the bitter end. It was nothing which you could argue against. Like the rising of the sun, it was inevitable. Clouds might obscure it, but the fact remained.

Case disliked what was at hand now. He had talked at length because he hated it. But there could be only so much delay.

"A man can't crowd his luck too far," Case said obliquely. "You got a gun, Monty. Make it good!"

Chapter XXV

TO BUELL PEARSON, the thing which was happening before his eyes was incredible, monstrous—as though a genie had sprung up out of the earth, holding ruin in his hands.

And indeed it was like that—the leaping up of a giant from the nether world, bringing disaster. The big man's mood had been good, for him. For in the last few days his usual even temper had deserted him; a calmness born of calculated progress toward a goal. Since the return of Monty Malcolm to the Black River country, things had not gone as Pearson had planned them.

All in a moment, as it seemed to him now in retrospect, he had lost his chance to win Verity McClay as his wife. And though he had accepted the change with a new policy as coldly calculated as the old, it had left a rankling hurt deep down in him. Part of that hurt was to his pride, that she should so readily side with a man considered a traitor, a man disinherited and hunted, taking that man's side against him and against his implied offer of queenship in the empire which he was building up.

Rawer even than the affront to his pride was the belated recognition that he had wanted more than just someone who could preside over his household, someone who could do it with grace and dignity. Verity McClay could do that, for in her was all the best of the old South and its tradition of gracious hospitality.

What he had failed to realize was that he wanted more than that. More, even, than just a wife. That he wanted Verity—wanted her for herself alone.

Now, when it was too late, he had come to see the truth. Even if he won his gamble, he knew in his heart that he had lost all that was important. And that realization, deepening with the days, had not helped his temper.

Driven by force of circumstances, he had thrown off the cloak of respectability, was now openly leagued with John Gordy in a policy of ruthless grab. That might be the one possible way for him to get an empire and hold it. And he was getting it. The turning of

Black River had assured him of that. But again the victory seemed an empty one, and so his temper, once so even, had become uncertain.

Loss of the treasure, for which he had gambled, had infuriated him. Having staked everything on possession of power and wealth, it was bitter to be cheated of the greater things just when they seemed at hand.

It was in that mood—one of restless irritation with Gordy, who rode beside him, with himself, and with the world—that he halted suddenly, staring in sheer amazement at what was suddenly revealed as he topped a rise. There before him was the genie, bursting out of the earth—a swift-growing giant which was tearing even such victory as Pearson had possessed out of his hands.

Right at the foot of the mountain, a spurting, muddy column of water—where there had been none before. A savage, gouging force, coming, as he saw incredulously, from the mouth of the old tunnel. Already it was several times as big as the original hole had been, growing with every second. Great chunks of earth, huge boulders were being ripped out of the heart of the hill, spewed forth and flung aside like pebbles.

For a few moments, Pearson sat his horse and watched, spellbound, awed, angry and a little frightened. It was hard to understand how it had come about, but not hard to see what was happening. Somewhere inside the mountain, Black River had been damned once more, so that it was taking the only exit possible—breaking out through that man-made tunnel which led from the cavern.

In a matter of minutes, such was the terrific force of the penned up waters seeking release, it had enlarged that hole so that almost the whole volume of the river was finding release now. And as it gained freedom, it was spreading out, seeking a new channel. Roiled as it was, it showed bright beneath the sun—bright and inexorable as fate in the course it was pursuing.

For it was heading now in a course which would take the river back to its old, now empty channel. Where once Black River had swung east and then to the north, he had turned it southward. This new stream, coming out of the hill to the north of the old exit, simply flowed east and a little south—until presently it would reach the old channel again.

The dam which he had made by blasting, the new course, was

by-passed completely. By nightfall there would be water as usual for Sam Forbes, for Stapelton and all the rest.

Here was disaster for himself, triumph for Monty Malcolm. Without quite understanding how it had come about, Pearson knew that it was so. It had been Malcolm who somehow had been able to upset all his plans, from the start. And it was Malcolm who had made that strange dark journey on the under-river, ferreting out its secrets. Now he had turned them against Pearson, along with the river itself.

Rage was climbing in Pearson as he watched the water spread, and figured it out. This was something which would make a laughing-stock of him, something which he could never live down. He swung his horse sharply about, spurring, wrenching savagely at the bit at the same moment, sending the surprised beast into a wild resentful bucking, which he curbed in turn with a heavy hand.

He pulled up, Gordy still beside him, to stare down at what had been the course of the river—at the black and now empty mouth of the cavern where it had boiled forth through the years. Ahead, down below, was the lake which he had built—a lake which would contract to a pond, and finally again become only a grassy meadow.

Then his eyes narrowed at sight of the saddled horse not far off, cropping the grass with dropped reins. A horse wearing the brand of Fishhook.

That would mean Case McClay. And that might mean anything! His face suddenly red with excitement, Pearson was out of the saddle and hurrying toward the empty cave mouth, Gordy still at his heels.

"What you figger on?" Gordy asked.

"Who knows?" Pearson wheezed. "But why'd he do a thing like that, except to get that gold out?"

To his mind, the thing was suddenly crystal-clear. Any other reason was inconceivable. There must have been a lot of risk in what Malcolm had done, even with what he knew of the river. Gold, or its equivalent—a treasure which might shake and break empires—was the only adequate reason for any sane man taking such a risk.

They entered the cavern, going with a new sense of caution, inspired partly by awe of these dank subterranean surroundings, where voices echoed hollowly, partly by the sight of boot-marks freshly made, leading on ahead. Presently they heard voices, and then they went more warily.

"We won't give 'em a chance," Pearson whispered to his com-

panion, as they stealthily narrowed the distance. "We're in gunshot range now. You take McClay, I'll do for Malcolm. You ready?"

His gun was in his hand, the steel butt cold against his sweaty palm. Beside him, Gordy nodded.

It was partly over-eagerness on Pearson's part, partly a smooth stone, slippery as oil, which turned beneath his foot. His bullet slammed an instant before he had planned, the lead splattering against the big boulder beside which Malcolm stood. Pearson almost lost his own balance, and the damage was done.

Now it was two and two—Case instantly ranging himself alongside Malcolm, with something of relief in his face as he did so. It was echoed in his voice as he spoke, almost gaily.

"This is the way I've always wanted it, Monty—the two of us together. Let's give 'em lead poisonin'!"

There was a lot of boulders thereabouts, hoary giants squatting in the old stream bed—plenty of shelter in the sudden grim game.

Pearson's questing eyes had caught sight of the battered iron chest, there on the boulder beside which Malcolm had been standing. It confirmed his own hunch, increased his determination. Whoever came out of there alive, he intended to be one of them—the one, he decided in the next breath.

For Gordy was only a gunman, at best—a handy sort to have along while this game was being played, but not the kind of man he wanted for a partner afterward. Not to share with! If Gordy was lucky, up to a certain point, it would be easy to end his luck there. No one need ever know, after the gun-battle had taken place.

There was a fever in Pearson's blood now—the eagerness of a slavering hound which, pursuing prey across the long miles, is on the point of pulling the faltering victim down, of slaking its thirst with the blood of its prey. In Pearson it was gold fever, and it was a frenzy made up of hate and frustration and all the things which had rubbed him raw.

The first few bullets had smashed against the boulders, or skimmed off their oily sides with a high whining protest. But such lead was wasted, harmless. The frenzy which drove Pearson would not permit him to take thnigs calmly, to wait for an opening and profit by it. His thirst had to be slaked, and fast.

So he came to his feet again, running, weaving, making good use of such shelter as offered itself, yet moving forward, shooting as he

came. Gordy, always wildly reckless, just as strongly feverish, was not to be outdone. The thunder of the guns in that restricted space was loud and raucous, like the voice of the unleashed genie. Its echo, from above and below, was a growl like the voices of the dispossessed.

There was recklessness in such a course, but it had its points. It was stop them then, or die. And running men, shooting, weaving about in that tricky half-light, with dimly seen boulders also in the way, made tricky targets. Malcolm realized all at once that his gun was empty, that the pair were still coming on. And he had no extra ammunition.

There was a weapon of sorts at hand, however—primitive but useful. Just behind him, a little to the side, were several round stones, each half as big as his head. He reached for one, swung back, heaved it—and saw Gordy, taken completely by surprise, go down under the impact of it, sprawling, as though hit by a bullet.

But in that moment he was left weaponless, exposed. And Buell Pearson, rearing up close at hand, was lifting his gun, triumph washing across his face.

Case McClay saw what was happening. A fever was in his blood as well. Always in battle that fever came to him, and it was what a man needed if he was to fight when the odds grew heavy. An exultant fervor which drove out reason, shunting fear aside as well. And today, as Case had wished wistfully that it might be, he and this man whom he both loved and hated were fighting, not as enemies, but side by side.

Case sprang, squeezing the trigger as he did so. His bullet went high, screaming at the empty ceiling of stone, for lead had gotten to him an instant before he could center his gun; lead aimed for Malcolm, now behind him. Case McClay staggered and went down, and Buell Pearson was still on his feet, roaring exultantly, facing a man with an empty gun.

He was sure of himself now, very sure. The situation was clear. Both other men were down and out, which was as he wanted it. Malcolm's gun was not only empty, but now he had dropped it. Triumph dribbled in the big man's voice as he took a step ahead.

"You had to come back, Malcolm—and you thought you had me lacked. But I always win in the end. The last laugh—"

Consternation washed across his face, wiping out the acidulous triumph. He had been so sure—so very sure. He tried to trigger

again, knowing in his heart that this time he was just a little too late.

For Malcolm had simply turned where he stood. His hands had dipped and raised, and the iron box which was the cause of all the trouble was in them. It was a heavy box, but he was casting it from him, heaving it at Pearson. All in a space so short, both as to time and distance, that even the gun, lifting again now, slammed its lead, not at the man, but into the box.

A futile thing, lead, against iron which was crunching forward with the weight of the gold and diamonds encased in it. Only once did Pearson trigger. Then the weight of the box was against him, pushing at his face—a corner, bent and battered, no longer sharp, but like a mailed fist in its smashing force. And then he was down, stretched flat, and the weight of the box rested on top of him where he lay.

For a moment, breathing heavily, Malcolm looked about. The silence, following that wild cadence of guns, was heavy, tomb-like. He saw that Gordy of Wolf Track was alive, but in no condition to fight again. Which was more than could be said of Buell Pearson, who had died under the weight of the gold which he sought.

Malcolm stared, a little dazed. Then, as his head cleared and he saw Case, he dropped on his knees beside him. Case, he knew, had taken the bullet which had been meant for him.

Case McClay's eyes were opening, pain-filled, a little vacant momentarily. He looked at Malcolm bending above him, watched as the Yankee examined the wound and sought to stanch the bubbling blood, and the old devil-may-care humor came back into Case's face, bubbled in his voice.

"Forget it, Monty," he whispered, seeing the thin scarlet of the stream. "You can't do anything—and I'm glad of it. It gets us both out of a bad spot. And I couldn't ask any better man to side me—or any better luck—for the finish."

Malcolm, surprisingly enough, grinned at him.

"A week or so with Verity's nursing, and you'll be around again," he assured him. "It's not bad. And you're like me: hard to kill."

He saw the sudden dismay in Case's eyes, and, understanding, his grin widened.

"And you can quit your worrying," he added. "When I report how you saved my life, helped me fight off the gang that tried to steal the loot, and everything—why, there'll be a pardon for you. The war's

over, Case. And besides, I'm going to need you to help me get Black River Ranch back in shape again. Plenty of work for a good cowhand."

Case looked at him, and slowly, as Malcolm bound up the wound, his own grin came back.

"Reckon I'd be a fool to argue with a man that has your luck," he said. "I never did figger that I'd be havin' me a Yankee brother-in-law—but I know well enough I will, and I guess this is one time the Yanks deserve to win!"

THE END

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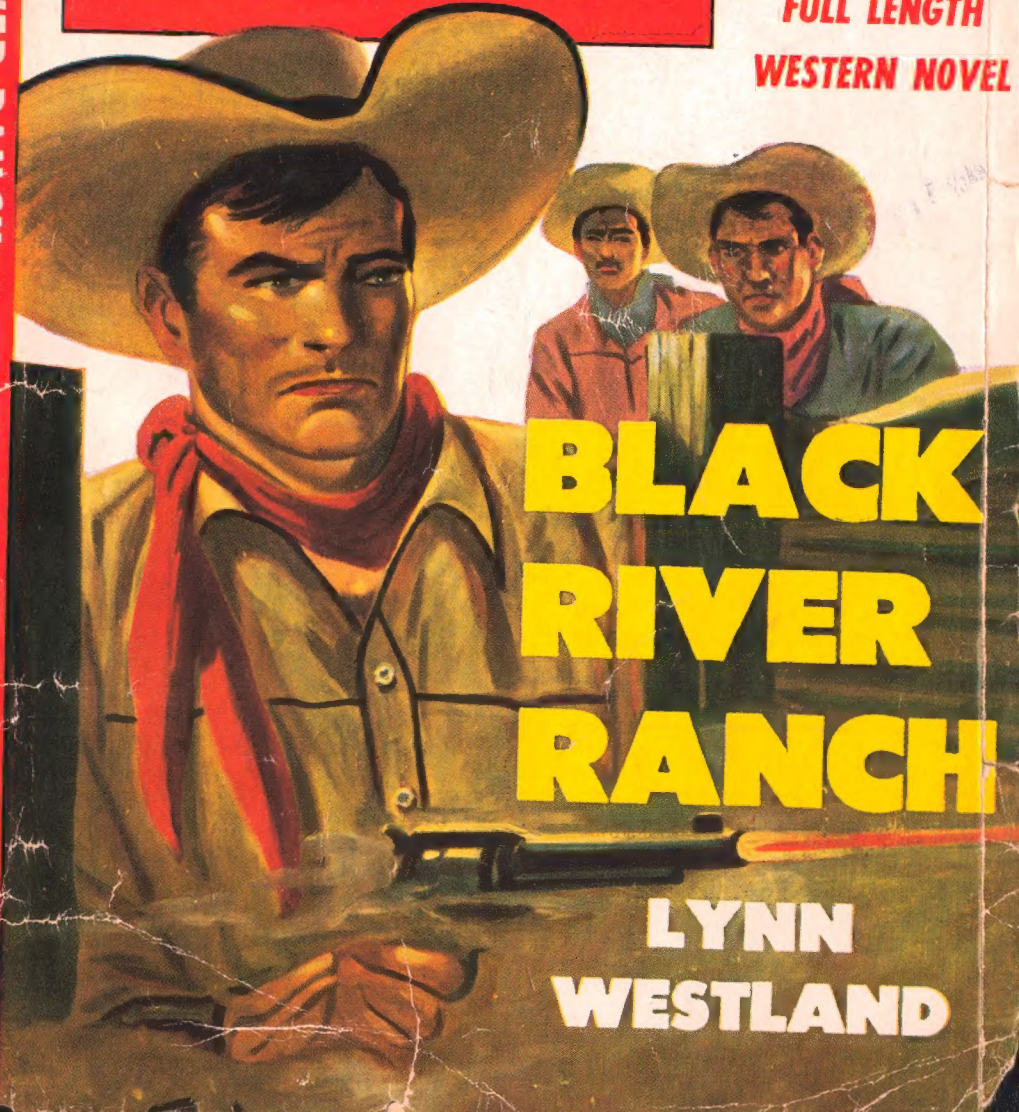

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